

TATTOO IN HASTE, REPENT AT LEISURE?

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Tattoos are becoming more and more prevalent in society and TV shows showing both the positive and negative sides of tattooing (e.g. the “Ink” series, Tattoo Fixers, etc.). Some of the reasons for a tattoo have been explored by Desley Hennessy (2011). It can be argued that getting a (memorial/life affirming/drunken/‘shit’) tattoo is becoming a rite of passage for young people especially on holiday in some of the hotspots of Europe. However, for some, this impulse and/or drunken purchase can turn into “buyer’s remorse” and regret. Having already used Procter’s (2014). Time/Event Grid in exploring people’s perception of an 8 day training course (2014) I felt that this was an ideal way to look at the meaning people gave their tattoo at different points in time and juxtapose that with their perception of how other people saw the tattoo.

Keywords: Tattoos, personal constructs, Time/Event Grids (TEG)

INTRODUCTION

According to Wikipedia (2018) the definition of a tattoo is

“... a form of body modification where a design is made by inserting ink, dyes and pigments, either indelible or temporary, into the dermis layer of the skin to change the pigment. The art of making tattoos is tattooing.

Tattoos fall into three broad categories: purely decorative (with no specific meaning); symbolic (with a specific meaning pertinent to the wearer); pictorial (a depiction of a specific person or item). Tattoos have historically been regarded in the West as ‘uncivilised’, and over the last 100 years the fashion has been associated mainly with sailors, working men and criminals. By the end of the 20th century, many Western stigmas of the tattoo culture had been dismissed, and the practice has become more acceptable and accessible for people of all trades and levels of society.”

Whilst tattoos have been found on mummies from ancient Egypt, it may have been the voyages of Captain Cook in the late 18th century that brought knowledge of the art to Britain. Tattoos in many guises and forms have been a way of life for peoples in different societies for many

years. They represent a variety of different things to each society. For the people getting a tattoo it may reflect either a mark of self-identification with their society and/or culture or a rebellion against their existing culture (e.g. the “punk” craze of the 1970’s and 1980’s in the UK) (Wikipedia 2018).

In Japan (CNN 2017), unless you are a medical doctor, the act of tattooing is illegal and in 2015 around 20 tattoo artists were arrested. It is socially unacceptable to have any visible tattoos and people with tattoos are, in effect, discriminated against and banned from places like swimming pools etc. where the tattoo may be seen. It is usually only members of the organised criminal gangs who get tattoos. This represents a mark of their bravery and courage. In the Austronesian island societies (e.g. Polynesia and New Zealand) the complex nature of their tattoo represents a rite of passage, being a mark of their life journey and indicates an important connection with their ancestors (e.g. Hunter-Paul 2012).

In the West, tattoos have long been associated with the military (36% of current and ex-military service personnel in the USA have tattoos, (History of Tattoos, 2019)), prisoners and interestingly with miners (where coal dust gets into cuts and stains the skin). For many people memorial tattoos are a sign of those they miss. With the rise in the “gang” culture, tattoos also form part

of the initiation and act as a mark of membership as well as signifying their status in that culture (Wikipedia 2018). However, tattoos are becoming more and more prevalent in modern, western society and the types, and gender, of people getting tattoos has expanded and changed (USA Today 2017, History of Tattoos 2019). For example, in 2012, 21% of Americans (around 45 million people) had one or more tattoos, 70% of these has more than one and 20% more than 5. According to the History of Tattoos (2019) 36% of Americans between the age of 18 and 29 have at least one tattoo and 30% of all college graduates in United States have tattoos. But only 11% of those with tattoos are between the ages of 50 and 64 years old. In the UK, 35% of those between 30 and 39 years in the have tattoos. Alex Proud (2018) claims that there are around 20% of the UK population with tattoos and most of them are under 40. Statista's figures for the UK in 2015 show that 43% of the under 40's have a tattoo and only 9% of the over 60's and 21% of the 40 – 59 age group has a tattoo. There are more and more sports people openly displaying tattoos (USA Today, 2017) and a glance at any newsagents' magazine racks shows that there is a proliferation of tattoo-based magazines making "stars" out of tattooists. Home tattooing kits are also more readily available on line.

To cater for the increasing number of TV channels and the need for more shows to fill 24 hour a day airtime, we have also seen a rise in the relatively "cheap" reality shows making cult stars a wider range of "ordinary" people. One of the ways to fill this need has been a rise in the number of TV shows showing both the positive and negative sides of tattooing (e.g. the "Ink" series, Tattoo Fixers, Tattoos after dark, Tattoo of us, etc.). This rise in exposure has also led to a significant rise in the number of magazines and websites devoted to tattoos and their meanings and regular Tattoo conventions are held around the world.

Some of the many reasons for a tattoo have been comprehensively explored by Desley Hennessy (2011) in her PhD thesis and so I would recommend her work and will not explore them here.

With the rise in popularity and media exposure, it can be argued that getting a tattoo is becoming a rite of passage for more and more

young people especially when on holiday in some of the hotspots of Europe. However, and in line with the modern negative media depiction of tattoos, for some, this impulse and/or drunken purchase can turn into "buyer's remorse" and regret. The question is how valid is this media generated perception of people regretting their tattoos? The History of Tattoo website (2019) claims that 7% of Americans who have tattoos, regret them.

METHOD

I have long been a fan of the more qualitative methods of construct system exploration. I have already used Harry Procter's (2014) Time/Episode Element Grid (TEG) in exploring people's perception of an 8-day training course (Fisher, 2014). I felt that this method was an ideal way to look at the meaning people gave their tattoo at different points in time and juxtapose that with their perception of how other people saw their tattoos. It is fair to say that whilst the TEG may not be the "poor relation" of Procter's qualitative grid techniques it is certainly "the one we don't talk about too much" being under-represented in the literature.

The TEG is a versatile tool that can give some new and different insights into how people perceived their development journey through time. I could see this relationship operating on two different levels both within the individual's own construct system as well as between the individual and the people they interact with. Initially it could operate as a form of Self Characterisation and help identify individuals' key, or core, constructs.

Secondly it can give us a sense of how an individual's perception of, and relationship to, their tattoos may show movement through time. This may also give us a picture of how their sense of identity may change over time. This could, hopefully, show how our constructs have tightened or loosened between getting the tattoo and when they completed the TEG.

I gave twelve volunteers a blank copy of the TEG and asked them to complete all the cells and took a picture(s) of their tattoos as/where appropriate. I then explored some of the underlying, deeper themes in a pyramiding style conver-

sation to get clarity on the background to the tattoo(s) referenced. Two other people asked to complete a grid about their piercings. One of these had her piercing at five as a cultural norm. The other got it as a positive act of “self-expression” and used constructs like *excited*, *confident*, *bold* and *happy* with no regrets.

Respondents were a relatively self-selecting group and were, in the main, employees of a large multi-national financial institute where I was delivering leadership training. They were mostly between 26 and 50 (with one under 25; two didn't give their age) and with one exception educated to a minimum of graduate level.

RESULTS

The tattoos

Of the 12 respondents over half got their tattoo either as a memorial piece, an inspirational design or of their children's names. In the main these people felt comfortable with their tattoos, although one who got her children's initials and hearts feels she should have been a bit more careful on the design.

One respondent got their tattoo (a brightly coloured flower on their hand) because they felt that they were *boring* and that the tattoo made them *cool*. However, they now felt it is *tacky* although their family appear to have come around to it and feel it part of *who they are*.

Another, however, got a butterfly on her hip over 20 years ago and felt *confident* and *happy* before and still feels the same now. Interestingly she says that from a work perspective she thinks it is *unprofessional* and *happy that they will never see it*.

Others talked about *wanting to do something for themselves*. One got a Cherub on her ankle when her grandmother was diagnosed with terminal cancer, as it was her grandmother's nickname for her. She is still proud of it eight years later.

One person talked about how the tattoo they got on their side for their partner *made them smile* and how they put a lot of thought into the design as they had some tattoos, they were *ashamed of* and covered up.

Some construct symbolism

Kelly suggested that the constructs that we use to represent how some things are alike and yet different from other things and have symbols attached to each pole (Kelly 1955/1991). The nature of constructs means that the higher order constructs naturally subsume lower order ones (giving rise to the technique of “pyramiding” to identify lower order constructs as part of our world map).

Procter (2009) explored some of the roles constructs play in our perception system. They are action orientated and help us make sense over time, containing the narrative or story of what and why. They can represent, amongst other things, our perceptual identifier, the emotional label we give to the metaphor represented by the tattoo. Thus, the tattoo becomes the physical representation that we apply to the experience of situations and events within our story. Therefore, the tattoo becomes not only a symbol of the underlying desire to get the tattoo but also both the symbol, and the object of what the tattoo represents. It is also symbolic of all the other allied thoughts and feelings around the circumstances that led to getting the tattoo. For example, the respondent in Table 1 got a small axe to represent *not letting other people influence her decisions*. For her, this implies subordinate constructs of *being her own person*, *confident*, *authentic* and *genuine* and it represents a *true reflection of her personality*.

Personal Construct Theory is, by its very nature, an anticipatory theory and all about predicting the future. Therefore, the concept of the individual as always experimenting and testing their constructs for “fit” and the availability of validating experiences raises the question of whether the tattoos are seen as more/less relevant as new life experiences become integrated into our world map. If the reason we got the tattoo is no longer validated by our experience then what does say about our feeling towards the tattoo?

Ryle (e.g. Ryle & Kerr 2002) suggested that constructs can be categorised as either influencing an individual's “feeling” or “behaviours” towards that situation. I interpret this to mean that Feeling construct words may include *Confident*, *Curious*, *Nervous*, *Shock*, *Surprise*, *Cool*, *Like/Dislike/Love/Hate* etc., whilst Behavioural

constructs may be identified by words like *Approachable*, *Capable*, *Quiet/Loud*, *Supportive*, *Positive/Negative (towards)* etc. and are action-orientated words.

Ryle also explored the aspect of directionality in grids and classified constructs as being reflective of either “behaviour towards another” or about “feelings towards another”. He also proposed that some constructs are applied in a more uni-directional way. Here one person is seen as the active one and the other person/pole is seen as more passive. This is in contrast to one where both people could be active participants in the joint construction of the construct, for example “how can *we* resolve this?” as opposed to “I think *you* should do ...”. Exploring tattoos from Ryle’s perspective may indicate our long-term attitude towards them influenced by how we were feeling at the time – our emotional state and the anticipated behaviour of others towards the tattoo.

DISCUSSION

Those who got the tattoos for memorial or positive reasons (e.g. children’s names, self-expression/self-identity) tended to continue to like their tattoos, however those who got them for more negative reasons (e.g. as a reaction to outside events or “trying to fit in/be cool) now regret having the tattoo.

For example, in Table 2 the respondent got her tattoo to “be cool” although, interestingly, getting a peace tattoo does not seem to be to make a value-based statement. What we do see in Table 2 is a consistency of thought across time for her peer group though. There appears to be an element of peer pressure and group think at play here. All the respondent’s friends wanted (and got) tattoos and now regret them, as does the respondent. Paradoxically, whilst saying “peer pressure shouldn’t be a reason” they all seem to be instrumental in creating just such an environment.

In both Tables 1 and 3 we can see signs of subordinate constructs associated with the tattoo. In Table 3 the tattoo represented a knee-jerk reaction to a situation. The respondent felt they were taking some measure of control in a situation where they felt like a victim and the inno-

cent party. However, rather than strength and survival the tattoo represented pain, hurt, and “rebellion”. Arguably as the recipient grew more mature and experienced these construct poles were no longer relevant to their sense of identity and reminded them of a time when they were in a bad place.

There was a lot of evidence of Ryle’s “feeling” category of construct with words like confident, cool, regret, surprise, shock, hate all used regularly. Some of the respondents’ reasons for getting their tattoo was that they were either inspirational or as a reminder of loved ones. Hence the feeling associated with the tattoo was of a positive nature.

However, there was less evidence of “behavioural” constructs, although this may be more of a function of the nature of the exploration and that behaviour may have come out in subsequent conversations. It is fair to say that none of my respondent’s tattoos were of the “shock” type and hence did not elicit socially or morally negative reactions other than comments like “tacky” and “not like me”.

Some of the behavioural themes were around “being in control” and being “rebellious”. One respondent (Table 1) did talk about the tattoos “suiting” her personality. They also made her feel “authentic” and that they were a good ice-breaker and helped her initiate conversations. Although another said that they cover them up in interviews for fear of being judged. Yet a third talked about how after the first tattoo he felt “accomplished”, grown up and happy.

With regards to the direction of constructs they were usually uni-directional and self-orientated. Some respondents reported that other people felt the respondent “should get their tattoos lasered” or that they were not a true reflection of their personality, which could also show a behavioural type of construct.

However, there were also many examples elicited where respondents’ constructs showed some relational awareness, although there were, also, other respondents who seemed to have little awareness of how other people thought about their tattoos. For example, Table 3 shows a marked lack of other awareness and a potential transference of her feelings on to other people’s opinion on the tattoo. She says initially her grandparents did not like her tattoos, her parents

were neutral and her siblings liked it. Yet she goes on to say that she “doesn’t like that her family don’t like them”; expanding on this situation it appears that the respondent is reticent about talking about her tattoo and appears to feel embarrassed. She says her family don’t comment on her tattoos and that she covers them up so she won’t be judged.

Another, male, respondent with nine tattoos of different types and styles on his upper torso (from lines of writing to tribal art) reported that he got the tattoos for himself and that even after 14 years was still pleased with them (“feeling flush” and two were “personally inspirational”). This respondent acknowledged that he was aware of other peoples’ negative perceptions. He talked about negative first impressions and the stigma other people associated with tattoos. However, he stated that his tattoos are “easily covered up”, that he does not see them as offensive and that his mum likes them.

There is also a more mixed attitude towards other people’s opinions from respondents. For example, one respondent felt that their tattoos were “very small compared to their friends and so weren’t a big deal”. This may cover a form of self-justification about their tattoo. Another who got a pink and green flower on her wrist now thinks that, while she thinks it is “tacky” and regrets it, thinks that her family “don’t judge” her and that it doesn’t bother them as much as she thinks it does.

There also appears to be a generational theme underlying how participants perceive family and friends’ opinions. In the main, peers were thought to be more accepting of the tattoos. Within the family parents were less accepting, siblings and nieces/nephews more so.

The perceptions of work colleagues were more mixed. Some were not working when they had their tattoo done; others had not told or shown them to work colleagues. Those who speculated on how their work colleagues felt were split between “it suited me/was like me” and surprise because “it wasn’t what they thought I’d do”.

This was a limited scope research exercise and leaves the door open for further exploration, for example, how do the ex-service personal and the over 60’s now see their tattoos? The results reinforced, for me, the power of Procter’s TEG

as a tool for eliciting individuals’ constructs, thought patterns and relational understanding across time and social groups. Respondents’ responses reflected a range of emotional reasons for getting their tattoos and reactions to them over time. There is evidence that as self-identity has changed over time so has the relevance of the tattoo for the respondent.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Female (26 - 50) ‘1) Alfonse Mucha jewellery design of 2 fish on top of foot – my favourite artist, but most of his work is seen so much I picked something more subtle; 2) Serpent and sphere (Agalloch album art) in Celtic style on thigh – my favourite band and best I have seen live: I booked tattoo morning after gig; 3) Tiny axe on the underside of my forearm – symbolising being myself and not letting other people influence my decisions’.

Elements

TEG	How I felt about myself	My family’s thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos	My friends’ thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos	My colleagues thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos
 <p>Before my tattoo</p>	I was only 18 so usual insecurities.	I didn’t tell them.	Most of my friends are tattooed so it wasn’t as shocking for them.	I wasn’t working before (a student).
<p>Day after my tattoo</p>	I loved the tattoo but otherwise the same.	My mum in particular hates them. Everyone else sort of expected it and didn’t have an opinion.	They are supportive and positive.	I wasn’t working before (a student).
<p>Year+ after my tattoo</p>	I still have all my tattoos. I think how I feel about myself has improved with age.	The same.	The same.	Colleagues are usually curious and want to know about my tattoos. It makes a good ice-breaker, my heavy metal jacket usually has the same reaction.
<p>My thoughts on my thoughts</p>	I would like to get full body suit eventually to elbows + knees. I think a lot about my tattoos before I get them and I have never regretted one.	My in-laws aren’t big fans of tattoos but they do agree that my tattoos suit me and matches my personality.	My tattoos are very small compared to my friends so mine aren’t a big deal.	I am confident when sharing my personality. I’m authentic and I think it helps people to relate with me.


Time: Episodes

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Table 2: Female (26-50) ‘Mandarin sign for peace on left arm – I’ve always wanted a tattoo’

		Elements			
		How I felt about myself	My family’s thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos	My friends’ thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos	My colleagues thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos
Time: Episodes	TEG				
	Before my tattoo	I felt confident and sure I was ready for my tattoo but a bit nervous about the pain.	My family don’t really like them as they think they are tacky.	My friends all wanted tattoos so thought they were cool.	My work colleagues were surprised about me getting a tattoo, they thought I would have it elsewhere.
	Day after my tattoo	I loved my tattoo as my peers all liked it too.	My mum didn’t really like it. She felt it was too big.	My friends wanted to get more tattoos.	My work colleagues thought I would have something more discreet.
	Year+ after my tattoo	I still liked my tattoos and wanted to get more but 12 years on I want it lasered	My family/mum is still not a fan.	My friends agree I should get it lasered because it won’t look good when I get older.	My work colleagues are shocked I have a tattoo, they don’t think it suits.
	My thoughts on my thoughts	I felt that I was trying to fit in with friend and being cool but actually I would do it now.	I think my parents were right about me regretting it.	My friends all regret having theirs now and they agree peer pressure shouldn’t be the reason for having a tattoo.	My work colleagues are right I don’t look like a person to have a tattoo because I am not that person anymore.

Table 3: Female (26 – 50) ‘Tattoo a non-specific pattern on top of my right foot – got at 15 after my boyfriend cheated on me and we separated.’

		Elements			
TEG		How I felt about myself	My family’s thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos	My friends’ thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos	My colleagues thoughts about tattoos and my tattoos
Time: Episodes	 Before my tattoo	Upset, hurt, lost confidence.	Did not like them.	They liked them.	Unsure.
	Day after my tattoo	In control, rebellious.	Grandparents did not like Parents indifferent Siblings like.	They liked it.	Mixed opinions.
	Year+ after my tattoo	Regret having them.	Unsure - they do not pass comment.	Unsure.	They do not pass comment.
	My thoughts on my thoughts	I regret having the tattoos and wish I had taken control/rebelled in another way.	Do not like that my family don’t like them.	Unsure.	I always cover them in interviews for fear of judgement.

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Received: 10 January 2019 – Accepted: 17 September 2019 – Published: 10 November 2019