

Jaggers in the pokey: understanding tattooing in prisons and reacting rationally to it

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Abstract

The legalisation of tattooing in prisons, as well as the provision of access by inmates to professional tattooists during incarceration, have remained contentious issues between custodial and health authorities in most Western prisons. This article examines the arguments of both stakeholders as well as the attitudes of inmates vis-à-vis tattooing, and suggests a multifaceted approach that takes cognisance of inmates' motivation to have prison tattoos, and (potential) public health implications of tattooing in correctional settings.

Prison tattooing in context

Tattooing is one of the many forms of body alteration, including piercing and scarification, and it is probably the oldest and most widespread of these. Tattooing by puncture, as it is currently practised, may be traced to Egypt in 2000BC. It is thought that the practice spread initially to Greece, Arabia and Japan, and eventually spread to the Polynesians via the Maoris by about 5BC. The word 'tattoo' is of much more recent invention than the art itself, having been introduced by Captain James Cook in the narrative of his first principal voyage around the Pacific Islands. Cook used the word 'tattaw', which in several Polynesian languages meant to *knock* or *strike* (Caplan, 2000).

The Greeks originated the term stigma to refer to bodily signs designed to explore something unusual about the moral status of the individual (Goffmann, 1963). Tattooing was grouped together with branding as stigma, a view shared by Judaism and Islam – purely decorative tattooing is a taboo among Muslims, while tattooed Jews must have their tattoos removed by a Rabbi before burial. Christianity, however, is ambivalent on the significance of tattooing (compare Leviticus 19:28 with Revelation 19:18).

Tattooing in the early years of modern prison systems was originally used by custodial authorities as a stigma, to degrade convicts. In pre-colonial India, for example, individuals sentenced to life imprisonment had their name and crime tattooed on their foreheads by prison authorities. It is noteworthy that the Hindi word for tattoo, *Godna*, also means "to wound a person's feelings". In Australia, there is evidence that convict tattooing was common aboard ship transporting prisoners from the United Kingdom. Such tattooing had the twin purpose of surveillance as well as to humiliate prisoners as subjects of disciplinary knowledge (Caplan, 2000).

In Australia, the change from enforced imprint of tattoos on prisoners to prisoners voluntarily tattooing themselves was evident from the early convict era. Over-tattooing did not always revolve around obscuring prison authorities' designs; older signs were sometimes allowed to remain visible, but altered in a derisive manner, to create 'in your face' effects on official gaze (Caplan, 2000).

Evidently, some prisoners understood the advantages of their bodies' innate plasticity, for frustrating or defying the State, through symbolic rebellion, convict parody, and satire. The body has always been an important symbolic site in the struggle over cultural identity. This struggle occurs because as the upper classes attempt to control the untamed impulses of the lower classes by regulating their behaviour. To wear tattoos, especially visibly antisocial tattoos such as those worn by prisoners in spite of their disvaluation, is to cause offence, to challenge dominant notions and contest limits and boundaries placed on the body.

Figure 1: Common tattoo designs among New South Wales prison inmates, 1999.



In New South Wales prisons, for example, many prisoners tattoo "F.T.W." (meaning "Fuck The World") on the backs of their hands. Other examples are shown in Figure 1, above. Furthermore, the very act of getting tattooed in prison, in spite of its prohibition, is a message of rebellion, of having stabbed institutional surveillance in the back (Awofeso, 2000).

Currently, enforced tattooing by prison authorities is prohibited in the Western world, not least because modern prison systems strive to operate on the premise that deprivation of liberty should be the extent of a prisoner's punishment, not gratuitous discomfort, abuses and deprivations imposed by prison authorities (United Nations, 1957). Nevertheless, prisoners continue voluntarily and enthusiastically to tattoo themselves in most Western prisons.

For instance, a 1997 study of 455 inmates in a French prison indicated that 427 inmates (94%) reported having been tattooed during the first three months of imprisonment; six of these were HIV positive. Tattooing was found to be more common among those who did than those who did not inject drugs ($p = 0.009$) and among injecting drug users who injected inside prison than injecting drug users who did not ($p = 0.03$) (Rotily et al., 1998).

A 1994 study among 102 Australian prison inmates indicated that 38% received at least one tattoo in prison. Intravenous drug users were reported to be significantly more likely to engage in tattooing in prison than non-injectors (Dolan, Wodak & Hall, 1998). The realisation that blood-borne infections are more likely to be spread by "jaggers" – a derogatory term for amateur tattooists who do not observe standard infection control practices – has led to calls by the public health community for tattooing to be legalised in prisons, and for professional tattooists to be allowed to ink and map prison inmates that wish to be tattooed during their prison sentence.

This proposal has so far proved unpopular among most custodial authorities, who suggest that a significant number of inmates were in fact requesting tattoo removal, and that tattooing may pose an obstacle to the rehabilitative processes of prisons by limiting their employment opportunities following release from prison. Based on over three years' working experience in New South Wales prisons and a review of literature, the author documents pertinent issues relating to the three major stakeholders involved, including

1. why many inmates wish to be tattooed, with or without official permission to do so
2. why the public health community advocate for inmates' access to professional tattooists
3. why custodial authorities are generally opposed to legalising tattooing in prisons.

The article concludes with a set of strategies that may address most of the needs of the three stakeholders.

Reasons why many prison inmates wish to be tattooed

There are two important differences between 'professional' tattoos and 'prison' ("pokey") tattoos. First, while professional tattooists appropriately trace designs on templates onto the skin, prison tattoos are usually drawn 'free-hand'. Second, since the invention of the first electronic tattoo needle in 1891, most professional tattooists use three to eight tightly bunched non-hypodermic needles which move rapidly up and down on the skin between two-three thousand times/minute.

Mainly because of the necessity for improvisation of this illicit activity, prison tattoo needles range from the technologically primitive to the relatively advanced. An example of the former is hand plucking, whereby a sewing or hypodermic needle is repeatedly dipped in ink and stuck on the skin until a line is achieved. These tattoos look more primitive than tattoos created with a machine, because a continuous line is difficult to achieve with a hand-plucked tattoo. Because they are sometimes self-inflicted, they may be mapped on visible body areas, such as hands or lower arms (DeMello, 1993).

Thus, the method of execution signifies that the wearer is of a low socio-economic status in that she/he cannot afford, or has no access to professional tattoos. Moreover, the tattoos themselves are usually in extremely public areas of the body where others can easily read them. More sophisticated prison tattoos usually involve the use of improvised rotary machines which, however, can only be fitted with one 'needle' at a time, and this appears to be a more common method of tattooing among New South Wales prison inmates.

Figure 2: Example of a prison-made tattooing needle.



These 'equipments' are normally made up of a motor, taken from a cassette recorder, electric razor, electric toothbrush, connected to a guitar string (The G string is said to be best for this) or sewing needle which vibrates up and down the barrel of a ball point pen. The whole 'equipment', having been converted into a rotary machine, is then hooked to 9 volt AC adapter, and is ready to tattoo (Figure 2).

Section 165 of the New South Wales Prisons Regulation Act (1995) specifically prohibits voluntary or enforced tattooing. Similar prohibitionist policies abound in most Western prisons. Nevertheless, illicit voluntary tattooing in prisons continues to occur among both male and female prisoners. Personal observation and literature suggest that many factors appear to motivate inmates to seek tattooing during incarceration.

Traditionally, prison regimes attempted to obliterate the individuality of inmates, relying on uniforms, codes, rules and regulations to transform individuals into homogeneous and conforming prisoners. Ironically, as discussed above, tattooing was one of the strategies utilised by custodial authorities to effect such transformation. Realising the potential role of tattooing in defining their sense of identity within prison institutions, the voluntary tattooing of words, images and gestures on prisoners' skins enabled inmates to create systems of values and cultural identification. The cultural significance of tattooing involves marking members as belonging to the same culture as much as it involves distinguishing members of one group from another. Prison tattoos are generally regarded by inmates who seek them as a way of establishing or re-affirming community, either with those who were left outside (via tattooed names and pictures of loved ones, gang names), with those who are left inside, or both (DeMello, 1993).

Tattooing in prisons is sometimes used as a proto-language. For instance, certain tattoos on the hands and face much more frequently mean major events, such as a rejection of society totally, or membership in a prison gang. The most easily readable prison tattoo is located under the outside corner of the eye and is called a 'tear'. A 'tear' on a man's face is a sign of imprisonment (or sometimes of having committed murder), and more than one tear usually refers to more than one prison term. The 'tear' thus serves as a kind of self-inflicted brand, not unlike the marks that were forcibly tattooed on prisoners in 18th century India, Japan, England and Germany. Jailhouse iconography is also popular among convicts, and includes bars, the scales of justice, barbed wire or other themes which echo the prisoner's own experience behind bars (Hall, 1997).

Tattooing, because of the tension and pain involved – negligible for some persons with a high pain threshold, high for others – is perceived by some tattooed inmates as a great aid in sobering a person. Some inmates therefore use tattooing to 'sober up' when they are stressed or angry, an important coping mechanism in a typically hostile environment. In this context, the very act of tattooing serves as a therapeutic event, a confessional release of psychic unburdening.

Other reasons for which inmates apparently seek prison tattoos are less widespread and more commonly shared by other tattooed individuals in the general community. One of the most comprehensive anthropological studies on the motivation for tattooing among prisoners, gang members, sailors and delinquents was by Dr Samuel Steward (1990), who voluntarily abandoned a Professorial Chair in English at Chicago's Loyola University, and worked as a professional tattooist in the United States for 15 years. His list of motivations, derived from interactions with about 10,000 individuals he tattooed included decoration, herd instinct, pseudo-narcissism, exhibitionism, possession, sadomasochism, rivalry, manhood initiation rite, compensation, imitation, compulsion, celebration, rebellion, pastimes, guilt and punishment.

In his view, the most common underlying motivation for tattooing was sexual - from a Freudian perspective, tattooing may be compared to a sexual act, with both active and passive partner, the insertion of fluid (inks) under the skin, the needles simulating thrusting movements of a penis, and so on. Given that, in Steward's survey of 3487 tattooed individuals, 2603 (75%) stated that they either had sex or masturbated immediately following getting a tattoo, the sexual significance of prison tattoos should not be overlooked.

Reasons why the public health community advocates for inmates' access to professional tattooists during incarceration

The public health community's advocacy for legalisation of tattooing as well as provision of access to professional tattooists by inmates wishing to be tattooed during incarceration is apparently based on the harm minimisation principle. Illicit voluntary tattooing has continued, and will continue, to occur in unhygienic circumstances in spite of prohibitionist policies. Since such tattooing has been linked to other risky behaviours (eg, intravenous drug use) that facilitate the transmission of infections, access to professional tattooists is framed as a harm minimisation strategy to reduce infection risk associated with illicit tattooing.

Because of the technique used, the improvisation of equipment, and the invariable non-compliance with infection control guidelines (often inevitable because of the clandestine nature of tattooing in prisons), tattooing is potentially capable of facilitating the transmission of blood borne infections. Literature has strongly linked contemporary prison tattooing practices with transmission of infectious agents which may cause superficial pyoderma, hepatitis C, hepatitis B, cutaneous tuberculosis, and warts (Post *et al*, 2001, Long and Rickman, 1994, Horney *et al*, 1985).

Another issue that concerns public health workers is categorisation, the notion of which emphasises that processes of identification are generally bi-directional. Actors identify themselves internally, but they are also categorised, externally, by significant others. Social identification is the outcome of both processes in dialectic interaction. External categorisations may be internalised, they may be resisted or there may simply be congruence between internal identification and external categorisation. These are processes that were first systematically discussed by the labelling model in the sociology of deviance (Hammersley, Jenkins & Reid 2001).

For instance, prison tattoos were until recently used by psychiatrists to predict the violence-proneness of individuals – tattooed prisoners were categorised as more likely to commit violent, assaultive behaviour, including self-injury (Newman, 1982), personality disorders and social deprivation (Buhrich N. & Morris G., 1982). The public health community is apparently concerned that poorly designed and visible tattoos are capable of influencing unflattering categorisations of tattooed prisoners, well after their periods of incarceration. Such negative categorisations may adversely affect the psychological and vocational well-being of current and previous inmates with prison tattoos.

Reasons why custodial authorities appear reluctant to legalise tattooing in prisons

A common reason provided by custodial authorities for their reluctance to legalise tattooing in prisons by allowing interested inmates access to professional tattooists is that an increasing number of inmates are currently requesting to have their tattoos removed, mainly to improve their chances in the employment market. Furthermore, custodial authorities apparently view requests for tattoo removal in prison settings as a positive sign of maturity and rehabilitation, which should be encouraged, in part, by not making tattooing legal in prison settings. Indeed, visible tattoos, especially poorly designed prison tattoos, are a major liability in the employment market. In one of the few studies of its kind, 242 employers in eight business categories surveyed in Australia in 1994 demonstrated that the presence of visible tattooing significantly reduced the chance of obtaining employment. In the retail, beauty and hospitality sectors, the chance of obtaining employment was reduced by 70% or more (Bekhor, Bekhor & Gandrabur, 1995).

Informal discussions with many prison officers revealed several other reasons for the reluctance of custodial authorities to support the legalisation of tattooing in prisons. First, tattooing is viewed by conservative elements in this sector as primitive, barbarous and out of place in modern society – putting a coloured design under the skin is perceived as more aligned to savage tribal practices than to contemporary computer age. On the other hand, is tattooing more barbarous than piercing ears to wear earrings, colours on eyelids, dyes on hair? If such mundane habits are generally accepted as matters of personal taste and preference, wouldn't one be inclined to place tattooing in the same category?

Second, there is the political dimension. Professional tattooing in the general community is a luxury unaffordable by many young people who would like to be elegantly tattooed. In fact, an oppressive class system operates within the tattoo community. One way that class system is obliquely expressed is through the naming practices that are used to describe tattoo styles and their wearers in well regarded tattoo magazines, such as *Tattoo* and *Tattoo Revue*. Terms such as “biker”, “sailor” or “scratcher”, and “pokey tattoo” are used in such magazines to refer to certain working class tattoo practices that are said to be outmoded and are differentiated from newer practices defined as “professional” or “fine art”. Currently, prison tattooists (“jaggers”) and tattoos occupy the lowest position on the tattoo hierarchy. Although many prison tattooists see their ability to tattoo as a means of obtaining gainful employment upon release from prison, most released prison tattooists find that professional tattooists are reluctant to hire ‘ex-convicts’ (DeMello, 2000).

Allowing prisoners access to “professional” tattooing may be politically damaging to an incumbent government. Opposition political parties may misrepresent the provision of such “luxuries” to “criminals” to accuse an incumbent government of being “soft on crime”, a charge likely to be believed especially by those unable to afford “professional” tattooing in the general community. Also, because the existence of lower class tattooing is, to a great extent, what gives “professional” tattooing its privileged position, “professionalisation” of prison tattoos would make it difficult for middle-class promoters of modern tattooing to separate themselves from a tradition that is seen as negative, yet they are able to retain the symbol itself. Given the renaissance of (professional) tattoos among mainstream middle class and youths in Western society, “professionalisation” of “pokey” tattoos may be politically costly. In his book, “Wilful obstruction: the frustration of prison reform”, Professor Tony Vinson (1982) documented several instances in which misrepresentation of efforts to improve the welfare of prisoners in New South Wales made him and his reform initiatives political liabilities for the incumbent State government.

Third is the cost of professional tattooing. In Australia, the cost of an average “professional” tattoo is \$A90. Given that at least a third of inmates would like to be tattooed, it would cost the Department of Corrective Services hundreds of thousands of dollars yearly in tattooing subsidy, even if inmates wishing to be tattooed are compelled to contribute to the cost. Furthermore, issues such as customised designs, elaborate tattooing and generous use of coloured inks, all of which significantly raise this average price, would have to be addressed on a case by case basis – a logistical nightmare in most correctional environments.

Finally, the potential of litigation cannot be ignored. ‘Litigation-prone’ tattooed inmates may claim that they contracted blood borne infections from “legal” prison tattoos, even though they may be involved in other risky behaviours in and out of prisons, including illicit tattooing and intravenous drug use. Also, custodial authorities are potentially liable if an inmate that enjoyed the services of a professional tattooist in prison decides he wants it removed. Steward (1990) describes a sub-group of such individuals as pseudo-narcissists who, on turning into true narcissists discovered that tattoos now marred their beauty and would go to great lengths, including instituting legal action against the prison establishment, to have such tattoos removed.

Responding rationally to the issue of tattooing in prisons

As discussed above, tattooing in prisons means different things to each of the three primary stakeholders. Thus, the need for a rational response, one that takes into consideration the concerns of all stakeholders in the design of a prison tattoo policy, cannot be over-emphasised. The approach suggested in this paper is based on the following premises:

- Given the above motivations of inmates for obtaining prison tattoos, and studies showing that between 38% and 94% of inmates obtain prison tattoos in spite of its prohibition, it is unlikely that prohibition *per se* would abolish this practice which, ironically was introduced into prisons by custodial authorities over two centuries ago.
- While it may be true that the unhygienic practices associated with tattooing in prisons may facilitate the transmission of infections in prisons, the converse is not necessarily true. Since most of the blood borne diseases likely to be transmitted via tattooing are more efficiently transmitted via injecting drug use, and since individuals who obtain prison tattoos are significantly more likely to be involved with injecting drug use, eliminating the infection risk posed by tattooing is unlikely to significantly contribute to the larger objective of reducing the risk of communicable disease transmission in prison settings.
- Providing access to professional tattooists is unlikely to eliminate the practice of illicit tattooing, partly due to the reasons stated above (e.g. stabbing institutional surveillance in the back, maintaining confidentiality of the proto-language that tattooing has become in prison settings). Also, the sexual significance of tattooing implies that, at least for some prisoners who desire a measure of ‘bonding’ with their tattooist, they would rather be illegally tattooed by a fellow inmate with whom they can be intimate during or after the tattooing process, than access the services of a professional tattooist who may be viewed as part of the ‘establishment’.
- What may limit the employment opportunities of tattooed prisoners is not being tattooed in prisons *per se*, but having visible, poorly done tattoos. Indeed, the decoding capacity of the audience is critical as to whether a tattoo is stigmatised as a convict tattoo or not. If such potentially stigmatising marking could be concealed from those capable of reading it, the likelihood of prison tattoos to adversely affect a tattooed individual’s opportunities for gainful employment would be much reduced.

The combination of a criminal record and visible, poorly designed, tattoos is inimical to effective vocational rehabilitation. Given the limited public health benefits of access to professional tattooists in prisons and its potentially substantial costs- financial, political and legal - access to individuals with tattoo removal expertise is to be preferred to the current advocacy, by the public health community, for access to professional tattooists.

Experience indicates that tattooing in prisons would continue with or without official endorsement. Therefore an important public health initiative would appear to be health education on infection risks, provision of disinfectants like bleach and detergent for cleaning tattooing needles, as well as encouraging prisoners keen to obtain prison tattoos not to have them on exposed parts of the body. The last point is particularly important from a vocational

and psychological viewpoint, as the current or former prisoner is then able to satisfy his psychological needs for obtaining a tattoo on one hand, and she or he is at liberty to show or conceal it, on the other.

Training should be offered to inmates wishing to learn the art of tattooing. As tattooing is now a recognised trade in Australia, such training programs should aim at meeting community standards. Inmates encouraged in such training may afterwards be provided with materials for making *temporary* tattoos on themselves and other inmates, using non-invasive techniques.

Finally, a primary prevention approach to the complex problems of tattooing in prisons is to discourage inmates from getting tattooed, and to advise those keen on obtaining tattoos to have a temporary one. This might involve 'marketing' the reasons for not getting tattooed, such as pain fears, desire to keep the body unmarked, social stigma and religion. Marketing temporary tattooing should highlight its advantages – designs may be removed within days of application, they can be remade until a measure of 'perfection' is reached, with the option of permanent markings made from such templates by professional tattooists following release. Marketing such a behaviour change would involve framing the message in such a manner that it addresses the core values of tattoo-seeking inmates, such as identification with groups, release of stress and boredom. Obviously, co-operation with other sectors, such as social workers, is essential. Important factors in influencing such change in behaviour on a population basis include imparting adequate knowledge, attitudinal change, positive reinforcement, fear, and addressing the core issues that motivate inmates to seek prison tattoos (Siegel and Doner, 1998).

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