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## Embodied narratives: communicative value of tattoos

### Ucieleśnione opowieści: komunikacyjna wartość tatuażu

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**Abstract:** Since the '50s there is a steady rise in popularity and social acceptance towards tattooing. While people may choose to get a tattoo for a variety of reason, it seems that for the majority they are meaningful and convey personal messages and stories in symbolic form. This article focuses on communicative quality of tattoos, derived from their narrative design. First, the social meaning of the very fact of being tattooed is discussed, drawing on prevailing social prejudice and stereotypes. Then, tattoos are analyzed from the standpoint of personal narratives, showcasing various meanings that can be deciphered both by the others and by tattooees themselves. Finally, the dynamic and relative nature of tattoos is examined, with a closing reflection upon the reason why getting tattoos might be so compelling.

**Keywords:** narrative; non-verbal communication; tattoos

**Abstrakt:** Od lat 50-tych ubiegłego wieku obserwuje się stały wzrost popularności i społecznej akceptacji wobec tatuażu. O ile istnieje wiele możliwych przyczyn dla których jednostka decyduje się na tatuaż, dla większości osób niesie on znaczenie, prezentując symboliczny przekaz bądź osobistą historię. Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest komunikacyjnej wartości tatuażu w kontekście ich narracyjnej natury. W pierwszej kolejności omówiony został społeczny odbiór osób wytatuowanych w odniesieniu do pokutujących uprzedzeń i stereotypów. Następnie podjęto się analizy różnych znaczeń tatuażu jakie mogą być odkryte zarówno przez zewnętrznych obserwatorów, jaki i przez samego wytatuowanego. Wreszcie, omówiona została zmienność i względność znaczeń zawartych w tatuażach, z końcową refleksją nad możliwym wyjaśnieniem fenomenu ich popularności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** komunikacja niewerbalna; narracja; tatuaże

### Introduction

Tattooing, as a form of body modification, is a millennia-old practice. The oldest human remains bearing permanent markings on the skin are approximately 7,000 years old, while tools that were probably used to make tattoos are even older, dating back to 40,000 years ago (Scheinfeld, 2007). Though their popularity fluctuated over centuries, according to Kluger (2015, 2019) the overall prevalence of tattoos in modern Western societies (the United States, Europe and Australia) ranges from 10% to 29%, with steady rise of public interest during the last two decades. Prevalence of tattoos in younger generation is even higher – for instance, it is estimated that every 4 in 10 Americans between 18 and 34 years of age have at least one tattoo (Ipsos, 2019). In Poland, the overall percentage of tattooees in general population is slightly lower, albeit still approximating 8% (Cybulska, 2017).

Why so many people decide to get a tattoo? While ancient tattooing is suspected to have been strictly ritualistic and tattoos served the sole purpose of status markings or personal talismans, studies on motives for tattooing in the contemporary world show a vast array of possible reasons. Comprehensive research by Wohlrab, Stahl and Kappeler (2007) shows that people may choose to get tattoos in order to beautify their bodies, to show endurance in the face of pain involved in the procedure, as a form of rebellion against authorities or societal norms or to just entertain the idea of being tattooed. However, for the majority tattoos hold a deeper, personal meaning, as symbolic representations or narrations of times, events and people (Alten-Muri, 2020). In a similar fashion, the non-tattooed seem implicitly assume meaning behind every tattoo, exhibiting readiness for their interpretation. To describe this phenomenon, DeMello (2000) uses the term “tattoo narrative”, stressing both the potentially story-like quality of tattoos as well as the need of the viewers to uncover this meaning. This cultural expectation is strong, forcing many tattooees to actually invent a story *post factum* for tattoos that were done without any profound reason. The author explains that a convincing narrative or a compelling message found in a tattoo design allows the public to justify and destigmatize the act of permanently changing one’s body.

If one agrees upon the fact that tattoos can convey meaning or a message and, therefore, be used as tools in communication process, the following questions arise. For those that choose to tell their stories via tattoos, what are those stories about? If a tattoo contains a message of sorts, who are the intended recipients of it? Are such “tattoo narratives” always legible, universal and timeless or do they inevitably succumb to reinterpretations and misunderstandings?

### 1. The tattoo

Before dwelling upon the answers to the questions outlined above, it should be noted that the very fact a person is tattooed seems to be a message in and of itself, irrespective of the peculiarities of design. People seem to have preconceived notions of who tattooees are, attributing them certain personal characteristics. Those assessments may vary depending on the size, location and number of tattoos, albeit tattooed people (women in particular) are generally viewed as more delinquent, risk-prone, impulsive and less intelligent, empathetic or spiritual than their non-tattooed counterparts (e.g. Kluger, 2017; Roggenkamp, Nicholls, Pierre, 2017). At least partly, it seems to be a remnant of the past – tattoos were once considered deviant and unruly as first wearers were members of the underclass and representative of truant, chaotic lifestyles: sailors, criminals, bikers or punks. This negative social connotation seems to prevail even after the “tattoo Renaissance” of the late ‘50 that transformed tattooing from marginalized practice to sought-after art, endorsed by people from all walks of life. Stereotypes and prejudice are particularly visible when assessed

indirectly, as implicit attitudes (see e.g. Zestcott, Tompkins, Kozak-Williams, Livesay, Chan, 2017), showing that the change in cultural perception of tattooed individuals is more superficial than profound. Certainly, this trend is not universal, as to some tattooed bodies appear as stronger, more dominant or attractive than the non-tattooed (e.g. Galbarczyk, Ziomkiewicz, 2017). Tattooed individual might also give the impression of boldness and courage, as the procedure of getting a tattoo is painful and the change is permanent (e.g. Wohlrab et al., 2007). Either way, it seems that tattoos rarely leave the spectators indifferent and can elicit positive or negative emotions regardless of their designs. This initial reactions of viewers to tattooees, whether they are drawn to or repulsed by their tattoos, influences the course of subsequent interaction. In some cases, this first impression might result in avoiding the contact altogether.

Many individuals are fully aware of the impact their tattooed bodies might have on the non-tattooed. Some choose to use this phenomenon to their advantage, consciously manipulating the way others perceive them, increasing or decreasing likelihood of certain social interactions and outcomes. An analogous mechanism seems to be at work on a detailed level, when people decide upon specific designs and/or symbols to be incorporated into their tattoos to create certain impressions (see below). Here, however, it is not the case of a specific tattoo project but rather the case of being tattooed at all. For instance, some criminals choose to be heavily tattooed knowing that it might be intimidating for other inmates, creating “tough”, presumably dangerous, social appearance (Vegrichtova, 2018). The individual, in turn, might be recognized by potential aggressors as equal, reducing the probability of an altercation. That is the reason why in a study conducted by Velliquete, Murray and Evers (2006) some tattooees call their tattoos a protective social “armor”. In a similar fashion, unattractive, appalling tattoos are often done by smaller, feminine-looking prisoners as self-protection from sexual abuse (see Handoko, 2016). Tattooed bodies are used as intimidation tools also outside of penitentiary system. Competitive, professional sports provides numerous examples. For instance, in a study of basketball players, conducted by Belkin and Sheptak (2017), participants admitted that they use the presence of tattoos on their opponents as a heuristic, “sizing up” their competition before the game. The players also point out that sportsmen who are tattooed seem to be more marketable and are endorsed by the media as cool, hardcore or “on edge”, gaining more attention and popularity than their non-tattooed counterparts, buying into the “bad boy” archetype.

As Kosut (2000) states, tattooed people engage in conversations with others, even if they do not intend it or realize it. It seems that not only a tattoo but also a tattooed body conveys certain messages that are readily deciphered by the public eye. As the meaning of “being tattooed” seems to be interpreted according to cultural stereotypes, the wearer does not have any agency over it – unlike the process of conveying meaning in specific tattoo designs.

## 2. The others

As studies conducted by Kosut (2000) or Strübel and Jones (2017) show, tattooees – especially those who possess many visible tattoos – are well aware of their communicative value. Knowing others will probably inquire about the designs and judge the rationale behind them, most will put much thought into their tattoo projects. If possible, the size and location are also deliberately chosen, as both influence social visibility of a tattoo and therefore the audience of the message. For those tattooed, the body becomes a canvas or a “billboard” available to socially display person’s statement or the message (see Atkinson, Young, 2001). The question is, what kind of information can be, and usually is, communicated to the public through tattoo designs?

Traditionally, within the framework of social interaction, tattoos – when inspected by an educated beholder – can manifest certain aspects of group membership, status and heritage. Tribal markings, present in tattoo practice for centuries, often bore a plethora of information about the wearer. *Moko*, elaborate face etchings of the Maori people in New Zealand, are a striking example of multiple meanings cleverly hidden in the design. For instance, a male face was divided into several “fields” with each field allocated to hold certain category of information. Right-hand side represented father’s heritage, while left-hand side contained information about mother’s status and lineage. Some fields presented information about birth order and birthright, others – rank of the individual within the group, their occupation or personal identification (see e.g. Cisco, 2010). Face tattoos worn by both indigenous men and women of the Kalinga in the Philippines and the Atayal of Taiwan served similar informative purposes, as Salvador-Amores (2014) points out. Just like in case of the Maoris, certain elements of tattoo designs communicated individual’s ancestry and bloodline. Further marks on cheeks, chins and forehead were added when youngsters reached physical maturity, signaling to the group their availability for marriage. Other symbols and linework present in the designs communicated certain skills mastered by the wearer, such as weaving for women and headhunting for men. The location, number and elaboration of each design corresponded to a personal success as a tribesman. Some elements of the tattoos were basically inherited, while the right for others to appear in the designs must have been earned. It is worth noting that in all of those cases these meaningful drawings adorn a person’s face, making them impossible to hide or miss during social interaction. Their communicative function is therefore obvious – those are visual representations of one’s identity, a “package” of readily available personal information.

A contemporary approximation of the above described idea seems to be visible in prison tattoos. According to Shoam (2015), who studied Russian inmates tattoos in Israeli penitentiary system, markings on their skin often create a visible “casefile” of a person,

showcasing to other prisoners one's status, allegiance and criminal history. Stars in designs and crowned snakes often signified "royalties" - high-rank prisoners and gang leaders. Gang crests helped identify members of different groups with a glance of an eye. Flower tattoos, such as tulips or roses, were signs of a youngster joining the criminal world, sometimes embellished with skulls or daggers to mark active participation in crime since childhood. Many designs - often worn on fingers - informed the viewer about crimes committed or "specialization", such as thief, drug dealer or murderer. Dots or crosses can be markers of convictions while drawing of a cat may symbolize a permanent resident in the penitentiary system (see also Goschillo, 2012). Just as in case of tribal tattoos, a great number of biographical information could be encoded into tattoo designs, shared with the public and decoded just by watching an inmate undress or shower. Similarly, to be properly understood one must be versed in prison symbolism, making the images culture-bound and readable only for those who were properly acculturated. Most importantly, in cases of both tribal and inmate tattoos the function of the markings is the same - broadcasting most important facts about a person and their life, irreversibly shaping how (and which) social interactions will be carried out.

Tattoos can not only be a vehicle for basic personal information, but also complex expressions of the self. Contemporary tattoos, unlike catalogue "flash" tattoos from previous decades, are individually designed and customized according to one's wishes, turning them into personal statements that hallmark different aspects of the self (e.g. Johnson, 2007). Some people choose to tattoo symbols pertaining to their area of interests and hobbies. Some depicts important events from their lives, marking personal milestones with a tattoo (see also below). Tattooes can also decide upon carving onto their skin visuals symbolizing values they profess, their beliefs or their life goals. Possibilities for the message and the created meaning are virtually endless. Therefore, some call one's collection of tattoos "a window to personality" (Johnson, 2007). Through the visual, tattooed individuals can consciously present themselves, or parts of themselves, in a certain way to others. Hence, it can be argued that tattoos can serve as an impression management tools, influencing what becomes obvious and openly communicated to others even before any deliberate interaction takes place (see Doss, Hubbard, 2009).

Tattoos are also often expressions of the connection we feel with our friends, family and significant others. Tattooed depictions of partners, parents or children (both realistic and abstract, such as partner's fingerprints or footprints of a newborn child) are often thought of as tokens of love and commitment. As Johnson (2007) argues, in many cases such images are deliberately placed on the skin for the others to see, to state the significance of the relationship and as a proof of one's deep investment. In a similar fashion, group tattoos are sometimes used to communicate and strengthen the bond between the members. Apart from an obvious example of gang tattoos, one of Oksanen and Turtiainen's (2005) interviewees

states that everyone in his family gets one specific tattoo, marking them all members of the same “clan”. Family bonds can thus be strengthened through the ink, allowing members to mutually communicate the feeling of belonging and connection. Eschler, Bhattacharya and Pratt (2018) also notice that tattoos can be used as a message of support and encouragement for significant others, especially in trying times. The authors provide an example of a woman who copied all of her husband’s, who was suffering from cancer, tattoos onto her skin. The purpose was to show him that all the struggles connected with the illness are experienced by both of them alike and that all challenges will be faced by them together.

Some tattoos can carry even more profound, intimate meanings. They might be signs of a struggle, an illness or a traumatic event that happened in person’s life. Such people often choose to memorialize the experience and/or subsequent changes in symbolic form on their skin. So called survivor tattoos serve multiple purposes and recipient of the message is not always the collective other but often the self (see below). In the social context specifically, as Alten-Muri (2020) points out, such tattoos may be used as a springboard for discussions about the event in a way that is safe for the individual. Trauma victims are often conflicted, wanting to share their experiences with others but not to dwell upon them or relive them at the same time. The design on the skin allows them to control the narrative, shaping the way they tell others about the event, augmenting or diminishing certain aspects of it when needed. Trauma survivors often find it easier to talk about their difficult experiences with therapists or health professionals through the tattoo commemorating the event, not the event directly. This action allows them to engage in potentially healing exchange without feeling caught up or overpowered by the experience. Thus, the tattoo elicits and facilitates communication in scope and form that is acceptable for the victim.

Similarly, cancer survivor tattoos serve a variety of communicative purposes. The symbols of the illness, understood not only within the group of tattooed patients and former patients but in broader social context (e.g. ribbon tattoos), are markers of having certain life-altering experiences. By their symbolism alone, two strangers can recognize themselves as having been through the same struggles, immediately creating shared context and mutual understanding. Moreover, many cancer survivors consciously choose to have tattoos that are visible and attention-grabbing, actually hoping for other to notice and inquire about them. The wearers state that they want to “re-embody” the illness that is often invisible to others, to give statistics a face. Therefore, they choose to be advocates for all the people sharing the same fate as so called “public survivors” (Eschler et al., 2018). Here, tattoo symbolism is used to open discussions and raise awareness.

Finally, sometimes the intended recipients of the message conveyed by a tattoo are of another realm. According to Krutak (2015), many tribal tattoos were not meant for the wearer or the community, but for inhabitants of the spiritual plane. Apotropaic tattoos were messages of peace and allegiance so the spirits could see an individual as a kindred spirit,

not as a prey. Such designs had protective properties, warding off evil. In a similar fashion, many indigenous communities believed that tattoos could be carried onto the afterlife. This exceptional quality of tattoos stems from rituals surrounding tattooing – it was not only a corporeal, but also a spiritual change. As Scheinfeld (2007) describes, the Maoris, the Lakotas of North America and the Inuits of the Arctic regions all believed that an individual is recognized and evaluated by the gods based on their face and body tattoos. Here, the tattoo showcases life of an individual and, if proven worthy, serves as a passage into the afterlife. Indigenous people of the Phillipines and Taiwan also believed that their face and body tattoos will allow them to be themselves after their death, recognized by their ancestors and accepted as own (Salvador-Amores, 2014). Without their tattoos, people were doomed to wander the spiritual world alone and aimlessly, strangers to both gods and other spirits. Here, tattoos extend from the physical to the spiritual, connecting the two.

A similar idea is present in contemporary religious tattoos, albeit the views of major religions on the tattooing itself are conflicting. In both Judeo-Christian tradition and in Islam tattoos are discouraged or even strictly prohibited, as the body is viewed as sacred, a temple of God, that should not be altered. At the same time, as certain passages from the scriptures are often open for interpretation, religious tattoos can be somewhat accepted if done to show allegiance and devotion. For the tattooees themselves, wearing religious symbols, depictions of God or the saints serves two communicative purposes. First, many state that their tattoos are a way of praising God's glory and the pain present during tattooing is considered a sacrifice in His name. Thus, tattooing becomes a religious ritual, a way to worship the divine and demonstrate devotion. Second, religious symbols are not only viewed as expressions of one's faith, but also as a deliberate form of preaching to the others (see Scheinfeld, 2007). Tattoos are then are one of ways to spread the message of God and feel connected to the divine.

### **3. The self**

In the light of the above, it is clear that tattoos may encapsulate multiple messages and meaning for the viewers to unfold. Nevertheless, a following question may arise: if tattoos are discursive in nature, what is the purpose of a tattoo hidden from sight? Indeed, some people decide upon designs that are small and/or invisible in daily life, as their location can or usually is covered e.g. by clothing. Therefore, the number of potential observers (and recipients of the message) is limited to those close to the person or to tattooee only. Yet, even in this case, tattoos seem to preserve their communicative function as the message may be intended just for the wearer, as a form of communication within oneself using the skin as the medium. Thus, tattoos can be also conceptualized as self-stories (Kosut, 2000), stories about ourselves told to ourselves.

What may be the function of such self-stories? As it was stated already, people often choose to get tattoos as permanent markers of important life events and profound changes (Oksanen, Turtiainen, 2005). For some, a tattoo may mark their coming-of-age, a rite of passage asserting their independence from authority. For others, adopting different social roles, both personal (a partner, a parent) and professional, may warrant a commemorating tattoo. Frequently, tattoos signify trying times and difficult life experiences. In other cases they may illustrate inner, spiritual change – such may be the case of religious proselytes. When a collection of one’s own tattoos is inspected by the wearer, it is possible to reflect back upon this personal journey, transformations in particular as tattoos often capture the self in transition, as it is disappearing to become something new. Hence, tattoos serve as a map of life experiences, visual timestamps accompanying our own narrations about ourselves. To describe the process, Velliquette et al. (2006) use the term “personal myth” – a story by us about us to us that integrates our past, present and expected future into a coherent whole. Here, tattoos are a vehicle and embodiment of different elements constituting our personal myth. The story, in turn, is pivotal in constructing (and redefining) our identity (see also Strübel, Jones, 2017).

Even if we choose to analyze tattoos in separation, not as an interconnected system of personal meanings, they still can “speak” to the wearer. Individuals working through difficult experiences may decide upon a tattoo that will serve as a personal message of encouragement. For instance, people who engaged in self-harm may choose to tattoo a message (visual or verbal) over their scars not in an attempt to hide them, but to serve as a warning, stopping them from injuring themselves further (Alten-Muri, 2020). Similarly, former addicts might have tattoos depicting the reality of the struggle of living and fighting with addiction. Such designs are not only stories of redemption, but also constant reminders of the losses and the price to be paid should they ever feel the desire to walk old ways (Pagliarini, 2015). Sometimes people choose to tattoo a message of hope for themselves. Previously described survivor tattoos often serve such function, being a source of faith and confidence in one’s ability to overcome various life obstacles. Companion animal tattoos, studied by Hill (2020), fulfill similar purpose. Owners, of course, choose to immortalize their pets on their skin to honor often life-long bond and stress the importance of the relationship. But for many the tattoo, just like the animal it represents, is also a source of strength, courage and comfort in their daily struggles.

Tattoos, even if hidden from public sight, seem to always have an audience to receive the message and uncover their meaning. In the case of designs intended for the wearer only, tattoos provide a unique opportunity for different versions of the self – the present one and the one hidden in the design – to clash and interact. Still, one important question remain about the message itself. Is the meaning as permanent as tattoos themselves?

## 1. The message

When analyzed longitudinally, tattoos uncover intriguing duality. The design on the skin, once done, is everlasting and unchanging. At the same time, it seems that their symbolic and semantic values are subjective, dynamic and open for reinterpretation. The wearer and the public may understand same tattooed image alternatively. Interpretations by different members in the community might also vary. What is more, with passing time some meanings might disappear while new ones emerge, on both cultural and personal level, potentially changing the narrative altogether. Thus, the semantics of tattoos is subjected to cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction.

It should be noted that tattoos frequently convey more than one message to begin with, not only for the viewer but also for wearers themselves. For instance, one of tattooees interviewed by Martin (2013) presented multiple meanings behind his *maneki-neko* cat tattoo. At the same time, the drawing symbolized his bellowed cat, a music album by one of his favorite bands that used the symbol on the cover and a talisman for good luck and fortune. Another person explained the meaning of his Icarus tattoo as a personal warning, an homage to James Joyce as well as his coming-of-age symbol, signifying his maturity as an artist. It is clear that, apart from rather codified tribal or prison tattoos, all the meanings behind a tattoo might not be grasped by the public from visual analysis of the image only. If not accompanied by a detailed narration of the “personal myth”, the public interpretation will arguably be limited to the significance of the drawings in accordance with cultural symbolism. Therefore, it can be stated that in most cases tattoos convey meaning, but some aspects of it can only be revealed through direct communication with the wearer, signifying their narrative limitation.

As it was already suggested, tattoos are subjected to multiple reinterpretations by the wearer during different stages of life. Santos (2011) personal story may serve as an excellent example. While enrolled in a conservative college, the author obtained a Ralph Lauren tattoo as a symbol of rebellion against the rules and as a stylish fashion item. Later in life, the tattoo became a sign of consumerism, superficiality and a source of embarrassment and aversion that led the author to a cover-up tattoo. As a minister, he chose the symbol of a Taizé dove. In the end, the whole journey became a symbolic triumph of the spiritual over the material. Therefore, the meaning of a tattoo may change over the years, mirroring wearer’s personal and spiritual development.

The story and the meaning behind one’s tattoos are also results of constant negotiation between the cultural and the personal, a “battleground of meanings” (Oksanen, Turtiainen, 2005). For instance, universally acclaimed symbols may be individualized within the design, subsequently altering their connoted meaning. One of Martin’s (2013) interviewees wore a tattoo of a seraphim with tattered wings, all in blue, weeping over a

goalie mask. This image of an angel, contrasting its usual depictions as powerful entity able to disperse darkness, created a new and personal representation of grief and sorrow over lost sibling. Similarly, for young underground musicians who participated in Handoko's (2016) study, universally recognized anarchy sign tattoos held different personal meanings - a symbol of personal rebellion for one, a memory marker of a certain event involving another subculture for the other.

On the other hand, cultural understanding of universal symbols may dominate over personal meaning (or lack thereof) hidden in tattoo designs. As Madfis and Arford (2013) point out, a person may simply like the idea of a teardrop or a spider tattoo on their face or hands, but the most common public understanding of such drawings will be inevitably derived from prison symbolism. Thus, the wearer will be constantly challenged with negative impressions and alternative, unwarranted interpretations overriding and, in a way, invalidating personal meaning. As culture's dictionary of symbols is constantly evolving, even innocuous tattoos without any prior cultural references might be negatively reinterpreted with time. To prove this point, the authors give an example of young man with "La Vida Loca" tattoo on his neck to signify his difficult upbringing and delinquent youth, who suffered serious abuse after a well-known artist released a song with the same title. Such situations frequently cause irritation, distress and, understandably, tattoo regret that may lead to a cover-up or an attempt to remove it at all.

### **Concluding remarks**

There is little doubt that for most of those who choose to be tattooed both the process of permanently marking their skin and the design itself are meaningful. The significance of tattoos is closely connected to their expressive and communicative nature that enables the wearers to tell their stories to a variety of audiences, including their own selves. But, in the light of ever-changing semantics of those designs, the last question arise. Why do people choose to change their bodies in such a way? Unlike piercings that can be taken out or pieces of clothing that can be undressed, tattoos are defined by their permanence. The wearer, therefore, risks personal inadequacy as the message on their skin might become outdated, misunderstood or obsolete.

Pagliarini (2015) might provide a compelling answer. She argues that in the contemporary, post-modern world all traditional systems of referencing have dissolved and everyday communication becomes virtualized, impersonal and incorporeal. In this "ontological insecurity" people often feel disconnected and fragmented. Therefore, tattooing may be viewed as a way to re-materialize the self through engraving meaning onto the body. Narrating and negotiating this meaning allows us, in turn, to re-establish connections with

others as well as with ourselves, bringing back order and a sense of structure to our experiences.

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