Self-Authorship and Meaning Making Through Tattoos

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Self-Authorship and Meaning Making Through Tattoos
Presenter: Mike Detmer
Advisor: Dr. Graham Hunter

Research Questions
• How do students make meaning of the external and internal messages they receive about tattoos?
• To what extent do students describe getting a tattoo as connected to their identity development?

Methods
• A chain-sampling method was used to attract tattooed participants who then took part in a semi-structured interview. The interviews were then coded for common themes amongst the participants.

Participant Information
• 6 tattooed students from the University of Dayton participated in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Tattoos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Eve</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brenna</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelo</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark</td>
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</table>

Themes
• Negative messages from family/faith traditions
  - Generational differences
  - Differences in interpretation
• Rebellion to claim individuality
• A “coming out” process for tattoos which presses against societal norms
  - Family disapproval/shunning
• Linked to a major life event(s)
  - Stories/chapters in their lives
• Nonverbal form of self-expression
  - Fear of a loss of self
• Deliberate choice to go through process
• Sense of belonging to tattoo subculture

Limitations
• The questions in the study were focused more on intrapersonal identity development rather than interpersonal identity development.
• Being at a religious institution may have skewed results about receiving messages from faith traditions.
• Attending a PWI gives limited access to different races and cultures, which could give different results.
• Number of students who participated.

Conclusions
• There is a pattern of receiving external messages that leads to an internal conflict.
  - This forces the student to respond and identify behavioral changes.
• Tattoos are very much so related to most students intrapersonal identity. There is also a link between interpersonal identity and tattoos as well.
  - Acts of healing vs. acts of aggression.

Future Implications
• A better understanding of tattooed students and their identity formation.
• Student Affairs professionals can help deconstruct negative social stigmas attached to tattoos through education.
• This sort of identity formation could be relevant to other forms of body modifications as well.