

Out Of The Darkness And Into The Light: Removing Gang Related and Offensive Tattoos

A Mixed Methods Study

By

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### Abstract

The objective of this quantitative and qualitative research is to examine the different reasons people give for wanting their tattoos removed upon entering a tattoo removal program and to explore in depth the personal experiences of people who have participated in a tattoo removal program. The participants are people who have had tattoos removed through the tattoo removal program at Catholic Charities, Diocese of Monterey, California. The quantitative component of this study reviewed 116 completed intake forms for an existing tattoo removal program run by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Monterey and used bivariate analysis to investigate the relationship between reasons given for tattoo removal, gender, and age. The reasons given for tattoo removal were coded into four categories: employment, identity, family and gang related. Out of the intakes reviewed 76 were male and 40 were female with a mean age of 26. The qualitative part of this study consisted of four face to face interviews for which the investigator used an interview guide approach. The interviewees consisted of two men and two women with a mean age of 22. Open ended questions allowed for four themes to emerge from the interviews: youth, reminders, time, and judgment. Both quantitative and qualitative findings supported previous research but they differed from each other. In the context of the field of social work, the results of the study show how tattoo removal can be an integral part of promoting social justice.

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During the past few decades the art of tattooing has seen a dramatic rise in popularity, particularly in Western societies where the reasons for getting a tattoo vary as much as the tattoos themselves (Brown, Perlmutter, & McDermott, 2000). In the United States alone one can see every kind of tattoo from homemade tattoos done in a garage with a safety pin and India ink, to highly detailed, stylized, colorful works of art that cost several thousand dollars and take several sittings to complete. In 1996 tattoo shops were the sixth fastest growing business in the US and it is estimated that approximately 20 million Americans have a tattoo, about 13% of the population (Brown et al., 2000).

Given the growing number of people in the US who are getting tattoos it is easy to understand how some people may come to regret their decision to get one, particularly if the decision was made on impulse during one's youth. Being easily influenced by factors such as peers and the media, adolescents and teenagers are more apt than adults to make a quick decision about getting a tattoo and may not be as thoughtful of the long term implications of the permanency of a tattoo (Brown et al., 2000). Research that involved interviewing adolescents with tattoos found that the majority regretted getting tattooed, and were embarrassed to have tattoos because the tattoos prevented them from getting jobs or they elicited unwanted treatment from others (Putnins, 1997). Adolescents and teenagers are also very likely to use tattoos as a way to express the relationship they have with their social and cultural environment (DeBoer, 2005). This is especially true for those youth who are members of a gang.

Whether it be for making money, a feeling of power, a sense of family or identity, or for a desire to belong, research on gang membership shows that the most common age for joining a gang is fourteen (Bazan, Harris, & Lorentzen, 2002). Given this young age it can be surmised that as they mature and begin to think about starting a career or a family, gang members may want to leave behind gang life for more “normal” pursuits of money, power, and family. Particularly, adolescents who have been arrested and/or are in custody may find that they do not wish to pursue a life of crime. Removing tattoos that symbolize gang membership is a very concrete way to mark the beginning of a departure from that life (Bazan et al, 2002).

The most effective way to remove a tattoo is through laser technology. The cost of laser treatment can be outrageously expensive ranging from \$250 to \$2,500 a treatment since the price of the lasers themselves are extremely high, around \$80,000 and up (Brown et al, 2000; Korman, 1995). Due to the high cost of laser tattoo removal, people who cannot afford the treatment often find their own means of removing their tattoos such as cutting them out with knives, rubbing them off with a belt sander, or burning them off with cigarettes or acid (Korman, 1995; Poljac & Burke, 2008). Fortunately, throughout the US there are programs designed to help with the removal of gang related, prison, and other offensive tattoos. Physicians, clinics, and hospitals will often volunteer their time and equipment to make the programs free or very low cost for the participants (Korman, 1995). The basic premise of these programs is that in removing their tattoos ex-gang members, ex-cons, and at risk youth will be able to have a fresh start at life. Tattoo removal program participants typically hear of such programs upon their exit from prison or juvenile custody and are often referred to the programs by law enforcement personnel or a probation officer.

## Literature Review

### *The Conflict Perspective*

A recurring theme throughout the literature on tattoo removal is the notion that tattoos reflect membership to lower-class and minority groups and therefore are a factor in social control and dominance over such groups (Zatz, 1985). By definition, the conflict perspective in social work claims social order is maintained by the power of some social groups to dominate others and that membership in non-dominant groups often leads to alienation of individuals from society (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003). This theoretical perspective is relevant to the topic of tattoo removal in several ways, as indicated by what is found in existing research on the topic.

Research on gang membership shows that gang tattoos act as labels and that just the mere presence of a gang related tattoo is enough to constitute the label “gang member” by authorities. This labeling often leads to harassment from police, a disproportionate number of arrests, and longer processing times in detention and court procedures (Zatz, 1985). People who have gang related tattoos are labeled as deviant and pigeonholed into a category that is socially acceptable to discriminate against (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003).

Other research on youth and tattoos has shown that whether or not their tattoos are specifically gang related, adolescents who have offensive tattoos or a tattoo that can be taken for one that is gang related, may often live up to the label of delinquent that their tattoo encourages. For instance, if a tattoo prevents an adolescent from obtaining employment, they may become frustrated and inclined to act out rebelliously (Houghton, Durkin, & Carroll, 1995; Putnins, 1997). This is an example of how the very act of labeling can alienate an

individual from society and encourage justification of discrimination (Hutchison & Charlesworth, 2003).

### *Tattoo Removal and Identity*

Research on tattoo removal largely indicates that the reasons people have tattoos removed are primarily socially and vocationally related and are not typically for aesthetic reasons. The literature devoted to tattoo removal reveals many reasons why people get their tattoos removed and often it is linked to the reason why they got tattooed in the first place. Research has shown that the main reason for getting a tattoo is to achieve a sense of identity (Putnins, 2007). For some it is an identity found through individual expression and for others it is a sense of identify found as a member of a group.

### *Tattoos and Individual Expression*

A study that closely examines the relationship between tattoos and social stigmatization among middle class adolescents discusses how what adolescents choose to have tattooed and where on their body they choose to place a tattoo can reveal pieces of their persona in relation to their race, gender, and class along with lifestyle choices and sexuality (DeBoer, 2005). According to the ideas in her study, DeBoer (2005) implies that a tattoo is a visual representation of the parts of an individual's personality they have decided they want visible to the world at all times.

Other research in the field of public health indicates that adolescents and teenagers are particularly drawn to the attention they get from their tattoos (Dammers, Iton, Mathis, Speck, & Nahmias, 2007). However, the attention they receive is not the kind they expected, which often leads to the kind of embarrassment and regret that elicits a desire for removal (Dammers et al, 2007; Putnins, 1997).

As adolescents and teenagers age out of their youthful identities and come into their adult self they are often hit with harsh realities that may not allow for visible signs of a rebellious youth such as a tattoo (Kellogg, 2000). This is particularly true when looking to start a career. A majority of the studies done on tattoo removal name employability as a main factor in the desire to have tattoos removed (Brown et al, 2000; Houghton et al, 1995; Poljac & Burke, 2008; & Putnins, 2007).

If the person who gets tattooed is completely confident that their personality, lifestyle, or personal taste will never change, using tattoos as a way to express individualism or to elicit attention from others might be a good idea. However, considering the young age of the target population of most tattoo removal programs, it is unlikely they are that secure with their own identity (Bochenek, 1996). It is the experience of one tattoo removal program director that most people who go through her program do so because they want to be more 'normal' and they are tired of the stares they get from others. They have been ostracized to the point where the identity they are portraying is not their own but one given to them by society and it is not until they have their tattoos removed that they can be themselves (Kellogg, 2000).

#### *Tattoos and Group Membership*

Much of the literature that discusses tattoos in relation to group membership is focused primarily on gang tattoos. The reasons why one gets a gang tattoo run parallel to the reasons why one joins a gang. Typically, gangs in the US are comprised of poor minority group members who often have, or come from families who have, migrated from somewhere else. They are marginalized based on their race and class and frequently look for solace in the company of others like them (Bazan et al, 2002). For many, joining a gang is a way to find a

sense of familiarity in a completely foreign and hostile environment, particularly for those who have left their families behind in their country of origin.

Research on gang activity in the field of law enforcement has shown that gang tattoos symbolize a lifetime of commitment to a group of people, a lifestyle, and even a neighborhood. They are a way of distinguishing friends from enemies and act as a tool for intimidation (Poljac & Burke, 2008). Gang tattoos are a badge of acceptance, a way of saying that someone belongs in a certain place and is welcome (Moore, Vigil, & Garcia, 1983). They also provide clues about a person's experiences. Tattooed letters, numbers, and symbols can represent which gang one belongs to, where one lives, and even how many family members one has lost or how many people they have killed (Riley, 2006).

Just as getting a gang tattoo is symbolic of permanently joining and belonging to a group, removing it is one way to permanently sever the ties (Moore et al, 1983). Gang tattoos are not only a form of nonverbal communication between gang members, they are considered "gang property" and removing them can be a way to let others know that one is no longer a member (Riley, 2006, p 46). This message is not only intended for fellow gang members, but for family members, potential employers, and especially, law enforcement (Aizenman, 2006).

In the field of law enforcement gang tattoos have become a tool for police officers. Many articles are written with the sole purpose of teaching police officers how to identify different gang tattoos and interpret their meanings (Riley, 2006). This presents an interesting dichotomy because on one hand, former gang members are often arrested just based on their tattoos which law enforcement sees as indicative of gang related activities (Ballve, 2004). In this case, the benefit of tattoo removal programs is obvious. On the other hand, law

enforcement personnel are often concerned that gang members want their tattoos removed simply so that police will not recognize them as a gang member and they have no real intention of leaving their gang (Riley, 2006). This speaks to the mission of most tattoo removal programs in that they typically require some sort of proof of commitment to leaving the gang lifestyle such as community service hours, participation in alternative education, or leadership development (Ballve, 2004).

For the gang member who wants their gang tattoos removed because they are truly devoted to leaving the gang and turning their life around, it can be imperative that the tattoos are removed quickly. They are not only targets for police, but for former fellow gang members as well. Often, when someone tries to leave a gang without permission they are seen as bringing disrespect to the gang and they may become a victim of a violent beating, extortion, or even murder (Aizenman, 2006; Bochenek, 1996; Rosenwald, 2002). If someone leaves a gang and does not remove their tattoos in a timely manner, they run the risk of being attacked by gang members and, as in one case, “Leaders attempted to remove the art with a hot iron and a cigar” (Rosenwald, 2002, p B2).

What is missing from the research on the topic of removing gang related and offensive tattoos is a discussion of how people’s lives are actually changed after having their tattoos removed. This gap in the literature suggests there needs to be more in-depth analysis of the reasons different people want tattoos removed versus the actual outcomes of tattoo removal. This mixed methods study examines the different reasons people give for having a tattoo removed, and how their life has changed due to the tattoo removal once the tattoo is gone. The quantitative part of this study hypothesizes that there is a relationship between the age and gender of tattoo removal program participants and the reasons they give for wanting

their tattoos removed upon entering a tattoo removal program. This relationship can help explain the differences in the reasons given for tattoo removal among different ages of people and between men and women. The qualitative part of this study asks the question: what is the personal experience of someone who has had gang related or offensive tattoos removed? With the two components of the study together, the investigator hoped to discover if the expectations of tattoo removal program participants upon entering the program are met as far as the changes they want for themselves are concerned. The investigator also wants to know if changes to make a better life can be made with just tattoo removal or is more than tattoo removal necessary to turn a life around?

## Methods

### *Study Design*

This is a mixed methods study utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

*Quantitative:* The nature of the quantitative component of this study is exploratory, non-experimental research that utilizes secondary data.

*Qualitative:* The nature of the qualitative component of this study is exploratory research with a phenomenological approach. This qualitative approach is being used because the particular experience of how tattoo removal affects the lives of individuals is what is being examined.

### *Sampling Method and Size*

The sampling method used to recruit participants was convenience sampling. Convenience sampling was used because it would have been extremely difficult to randomly select people from the general population who have had gang-related or offensive tattoos

removed. As an intern who works with the tattoo removal program, the investigator had access to the records of current and previous program participants.

*Quantitative:* The quantitative component of this study utilized completed intake forms for an existing tattoo removal program run by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Monterey. Data was taken from intake forms that had been completed by people of all ages who have either completed the tattoo removal process, are currently in the process of having tattoos removed, or are on the program waiting list to begin the tattoo removal process. A total of 116 intake forms were reviewed. Please see Appendix A for a blank copy of the intake form.

Table 1 presents a summary of the quantitative sample characteristics. Overall, the percentage of males in the study is 65.5%. The percentage of people who gave employment as a reason for tattoo removal was 52.6% which makes employment the most popular reason of the four categories. The table also shows that among both men and women the least popular reason given for wanting tattoos removed was gang related which is 20.7%.

**Table 1***Quantitative Sample Characteristics*

Characteristics	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	%
Gender		
Male	76	65.5
Female	40	34.5
Reason is Employment		
Yes	61	52.6
No	55	47.4
Reason is Identity		
Yes	42	36.2
No	74	63.8
Reason is Family		
Yes	27	23.3
No	89	76.7
Reason is Gang Related		
Yes	24	20.7
No	92	79.3
Age (in years)		<i>M</i> = 26.49 <i>SD</i> = 9.12

<sup>a</sup>Total sample *n* = 116

*Qualitative:* The qualitative part of this study consisted of four face to face interviews. The interviewees were participants of the tattoo removal program at Catholic Charities, Diocese of Monterey. The rationale for employing this type of participant for this study is that they were able to provide information about how their lives have changed due to tattoo removal. All individuals interviewed by the investigator are at least 18 years old.

To recruit interviewees, the investigator personally called 26 program participants. The people called had either completed the tattoo removal process or were in the process of having tattoos removed. They were told about the study and asked if they would like to participate in an interview. Please see Appendix B for Participant Recruitment Phone Script.

Table 2 presents a summary of the qualitative sample characteristics. The table shows that the sample was split evenly in half for gender (50% male, 50% female) and that none of the interviewees were employed at the time they were interviewed. The table also shows that 75% of the participants are Caucasian and 25% Latino, which may or may not be indicative of the entire population of tattoo removal program participants.

**Table 2**

*Qualitative Sample Characteristics*

Characteristics	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	%
Gender		
Male	2	50.0
Female	2	50.0
Employed		
Yes	0	0
No	4	100.0
Ethnicity		
Latino	1	25.0
Caucasian	3	75.0
Age (in years)		<i>M</i> = 22.5 <i>SD</i> = 7.85

<sup>a</sup>Total Sample *n* = 4

*Variables and Measures*

*Quantitative:* The quantitative part of this research used descriptive analysis to investigate the reasons participants give for having tattoos removed and chi-square analysis to investigate the relationship between reasons given for tattoo removal and two areas of demographic information: age and gender. Initially the investigator was going to look at three other variables as well (employment status, ethnicity, and whether or not the tattoos removed were gang related) however, upon reviewing the case files the investigator discovered that this information was not available for most of the program participants. The reasons participants gave for wanting their tattoos removed were coded into four categories: employment, identity, family, and desire to leave a gang.

The investigator derived the categories from the information given by participants on the intake forms and from information provided in letters of recommendation for participants. An example of information that was written by a participant on their intake form regarding why they want their tattoos removed that was coded into the category “family” is: “I don’t want my kids to ask me why I have tattoos on my face and hands.” Many participants had reasons for wanting their tattoos removed that fit into several, if not all, of the four categories. For example, one participant wrote on his intake form, “Maximum regret, wanna do better in life. My tattoo will cause problems to myself and to my family. I want to get out of gang violence and start over.” These reasons were coded into the “identity”, “family”, and “desire to leave a gang” categories. An example of the category “employment” coded from a letter of recommendation is: “The tattoo on her left hand has been problematic. Her tattoo is visible to our patients and does not appear to be clean or professional. There have been occasions where physicians, staff, and patients have asked me if she is in a gang.”

Another example of information taken from a letter of recommendation and coded into the “identity” category is: “It would be a tremendous relief to her to remove her tattoos in an effort to symbolize her progress in recovery by doing away with the old self and fostering the new.” Many letters of recommendation for former gang members were written by parole officers. Here is an example taken from one that was coded into the category “desire to leave a gang”: “\_\_\_\_\_ has volunteered to have his tattoos removed, and has taken the first step in the right direction in leaving the gang lifestyle. This is a hard decision for him to make, and in doing so, will help him to remove himself from the gang lifestyle.”

*Qualitative:* For the qualitative interviews an interview guide approach was used. The interview guide included questions about demographic information such as age, ethnicity, and employment along with open ended interview questions. In general, the interview guide had questions that target demographic information, reasons for getting tattoos and having tattoos removed, and how tattoo removal has affected the life of the participant. Open ended questions allowed for themes to emerge from the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded upon participants consent, and the investigator took hand-written notes during the interviews. Please see Appendix C for the interview guide.

#### *Reliability and Validity*

*Quantitative:* The reliability of the Catholic Charities tattoo removal program intake forms may be an issue because some of the forms have been filled out by the program participant and some have been filled out by a Catholic Charities employee. This means that the question pertaining to reasons for tattoo removal may be answered differently depending on if a person is reading the question and writing the answer or if they are being asked the question verbally by someone else who then writes down the answer. The validity of the

intake forms may also be an issue since there is no way to test if the answers given by program participants are truthful. The reason participants may not be truthful is that there might be pressure to have a “good” reason for wanting a tattoo removed to be accepted into the program. For example, if the real reason someone wants a tattoo removed is that they simply do not like it anymore, then they might think they will not be accepted into the program for that reason alone. Therefore, they might make up a “better” reason such as for employment purposes.

*Qualitative:* To ensure the credibility of the data collected in the qualitative interviews the investigator used member checking and peer review methods. At the end of each interview the investigator summarized the notes taken during the interview with the participant to clarify their responses. The investigator also reviewed the interview guide with Maria Runciman, Catholic Charities Director of Clinical Counseling, the head of the tattoo removal program, and the investigator’s direct supervisor at Catholic Charities.

#### *Human Subjects*

Confidentiality was maintained by not using any identifying information about the participants in the research report. Please see Appendix D for SJSU HS-IRB approval letter, Appendix E for Catholic Charities agency support letter, and Appendix F for the San Jose State University School of Social Work Field Agency’s Approval of Research Project Prospectus.

*Quantitative:* Participant’s names, addresses, telephone numbers, and any other identifying data was not taken from the tattoo removal program intake forms utilized for the quantitative part of the study. All tattoo removal program intake forms were reviewed at the Catholic Charities office when only the investigator was present. The Catholic Charities

Tattoo Removal Program Authorization for Release of Information form authorizes the release of, among other things, “quote any pertinent comment/s I might make if interviewed”. There is also a line for a signature of a parent/guardian if the tattoo removal program applicant is a minor. This form is important because the investigator reviewed intake forms completed by minors and this authorization for release signed by a parent/guardian gave the investigator consent to review the files of a minor. Please see Appendix G for the Catholic Charities Tattoo Removal Program Authorization for Release of Information form.

*Qualitative:* Participant’s names, addresses, telephone numbers, and any other identifying data were not asked for during the qualitative interviews. The investigator’s notes from the qualitative interviews were organized by identification numbers. All interview notes were kept in the investigator’s locked briefcase.

#### *Procedures*

*Quantitative:* Catholic Charities tattoo removal intake forms were reviewed and coded for data which was entered directly into SPSS. All quantitative data were collected in one day at the Catholic Charities counseling center. Data collection occurred on a specific day when there was nobody present in the Catholic Charities counseling offices. This day was chosen by the investigator so that the investigator could view the files openly without the possibility of anyone else looking at them. This ensured the anonymity of the files being reviewed.

*Qualitative:* The qualitative interviews were scheduled by the investigator and participants during the initial phone conversation for participant recruitment. Upon arrival for their interview participants were met by the investigator in the waiting room and were shown to a small, private counseling room. Before the interview was begun the investigator

reviewed the Agreement to Participate in Research with the participant. Once the participant agreed to be interviewed then both the participant and the investigator signed and dated the consent form. The investigator gave a brief description of the purpose of the study before asking the questions on the interview guide. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the research before they were asked any interview questions. Each interview lasted approximately 20-60 minutes and all were conducted by the investigator of the study. All interviews were audio recorded and the investigator took handwritten notes. The investigator supplied the audio recording equipment. Once an interview was completed, a copy of the signed Agreement to Participate in Research was given to the participants along with a \$10 Target gift card compensation. Please see Appendix H for a copy of the consent form used by the investigator for the interviews.

#### *Analysis of Data*

*Quantitative:* A bivariate analysis using four Chi-Square tests was done to test the hypothesis that there is a relationship between the categorical variable gender and the four categorical variables regarding reasons given for tattoo removal: employment, identity, family, and gang membership. A bivariate analysis using four independent sample *t* tests was done to test the hypothesis that there is a difference in the means of the interval variable age and the four categorical variables regarding reasons given for tattoo removal: employment, identity, family, and gang membership.

*Qualitative:* The phenomenological approach to the exploratory design of the qualitative component of this study and the open ended interview questions allowed for themes to emerge from the interviews. Through content analysis themes that pertain to the specific experience of having tattoos removed and how the lives of tattoo removal program

participants have changed since having their tattoos removed were identified. Demographic data was also collected and summarized using frequencies and summary statistics. The demographics that were summarized are: age, gender, ethnicity, and employment status.

## Results

### *Quantitative*

The purpose of the exploratory quantitative component of this study was to utilize secondary data to investigate the hypothesis that there is a relationship between the age and gender of tattoo removal program participants and the reasons they give for wanting their tattoos removed upon entering a tattoo removal program. Please refer to Table 1 in the methods section of this report for a summary of the quantitative sample characteristics.

Table 3 shows the numbers and percentages of the four different reasons given for tattoo removal by gender. Results from Chi-square tests for independence show that there is a significant relationship between gender and two of the reason categories for tattoo removal: employment and gang related.

Out of everyone who gave employment as a reason for tattoo removal, 72.5% are women compared to 42.1% men. A Chi-Square test for independence shows a significant relationship between gender and employment as a reason for tattoo removal,  $\chi^2(1, N = 116) = 9.710^a$ ,  $p < .05$ . In this case, the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between gender and employment as a reason for tattoo removal is rejected.

Out of everyone who gave gang related reasons for having tattoos removed, 28.9% are male which is much higher than the 5.0% who are female. A Chi-square test for independence shows a significant relationship between gender and having a gang related reason for tattoo removal,  $\chi^2(1, N = 116) = 9.159^a$ ,  $p < .05$ .

**Table 3***Bivariate Analysis: Reasons Given for Tattoo Removal by Gender*

Reason	Gender				Significant Differences
	Male Yes	Male No	Female Yes	Female No	
Employment	32 (42.1%)	44 (57.9%)	29 (72.5%)	11 (27.5%)	F > M *
Identity	28 (36.8%)	48 (63.2%)	14 (35.0%)	26 (65.0%)	None
Family	18 (23.7%)	58 (76.3%)	9 (22.5%)	31 (77.5%)	None
Gang	22 (28.9%)	54 (71.1%)	2 (5.0%)	38 (95.0%)	M > F *

Alpha using two-tailed tests \*  $p < .05$ 

Table 4 shows the four different reasons given for tattoo removal by the means and standard deviations of age. Results from independent sample  $t$  tests comparing means show that the mean age of participants who gave gang related reasons for having tattoos removed was significantly younger than the age of those who did not. For those who gave gang related reasons for wanting tattoos removed, ( $M = 19.92$ ,  $SD = 4.92$ ),  $t(24) = 5.97$ ,  $p = .000$ . And for those who did not have gang related reasons for tattoo removal, ( $M = 28.21$ ,  $SD = 9.19$ ),  $t(92) = 5.97$ ,  $p = .000$ . Additionally, when looking at the four categories for tattoo removal as a whole, it is evident that the mean age of participants who wanted their tattoos removed for gang related reasons looks to be significantly younger than all the other means in the table.

**Table 4***Bivariate Analysis: Reasons Given for Tattoo Removal by Age*

Reason	Age in Years		Significant Differences
	Yes Mean (SD)	No Mean (SD)	
Employment	27.98 (7.58)	24.84 (10.39)	None
Identity	27.98 (10.99)	25.65 (7.82)	None
Family	27.74 (8.67)	26.11 (9.26)	None
Gang	19.92 (4.92)	28.21 (9.19)	No > Yes *

Alpha using two-tailed tests \*  $p < .05$ *Qualitative*

The purpose of the qualitative portion of this study is to explore in-depth the personal experiences of people who have been through the tattoo removal process. The phenomenological approach taken for the qualitative portion of the study allowed for various themes to emerge from the results of the four face to face interviews conducted by the investigator. The investigator transcribed the interviews and read over the transcriptions many times highlighting pieces of narrative that the investigator felt exemplified several themes. Through this process and over time the investigator recognized four main themes that ran throughout all the interview results. The four main themes identified by the investigator in the results are: Youth (“It just seemed like the thing to do”), Reminders (“It represented a negative time in my life”), Time (“It’s a slow process but it will be rewarding at the end”), and Judgment (“They think bad of me right away”). Each of these will now be described in detail with examples from the interviews provided for further illustration.

**Youth (“It just seemed like the thing to do”)**

All four interviewees described not putting very much thought into the decision to get a tattoo. Specifically, their young age when they got tattooed was a major factor in their reasons for wanting their tattoos removed. The interviewees described how the fact that they were young when they got their tattoos contributed to feeling regret about them later in life.

An example of age as a factor is “I was young and drinking a lot. The tattooist was my stepsister’s boyfriend so it was like I could get anything I want. I just didn’t know what to get so I just picked something”. And similarly,

I was 14 when I got my first three tattoos and I was using a lot and hanging out with gang members. And so like, my motive behind it was, I guess just getting it. Like a spontaneous thing because some person I knew was giving tattoos, like he made his homemade machine and I was like, I want one of those you know.

Both of these statements describe how in youth, exposure to an opportunity to get tattooed by a friend or acquaintance can lead to a quick decision without any thought about later regret. Both statements also describe the influence of drugs and alcohol as a contributor to being unable to think about how decisions made in youth will affect the future.

There are other examples of youth as a factor in the experiences of the interviewees such as, “I got it when I was 15 so I didn’t quite think about it too much. I admired somebody and they had a rose on their back.” And, “I don’t know, I just got it cause it seemed like the thing to do, I was bored.” These statements exemplify the idea that at a young age people may not often put a lot of thought into decisions which can heighten feelings of regret later on.

**Reminders (“It represented a negative time in my life”)**

The idea that tattoos are a reminder of the past and that the removal of tattoos could aid in forgetting the past came up throughout all of the interviews. This is exemplified in the following two statements:

And it gave me a reminder you know? It was just kind of like a trigger, just like, dang you know, it didn't represent nothing positive in my life you know? It absolutely like, represented a negative time in my life. From my kneecap down, like I would just look at it and it was like, oh my gosh!

So, like waking up every day and seeing it on my body, it could trigger me to want to go use marijuana because I might have a moment of feeling, oh, that was fun you know? Um, so it kind of like brings up bad memories of the past for me. And um, to be able to like, get rid of it, it's a healthy thing for me and it helps me grow as a person and also respect myself more. Um, cause I can't change the past but I can just try and do the next right thing.

Both of these statements speak to the notion that tattoo removal is much more than simply removing ink from one's body. For these interviewees their tattoos represented a life of mistakes and bad choices and the opportunity to have them removed gave them an opportunity to change as a whole person. For them, erasing their tattoos means to literally erase the past.

**Time (“It's a slow process but it will be rewarding at the end”)**

Tattoo removal is a slow process, sometimes taking several years for one tattoo to disappear completely. For the interviewees in this study the time spent waiting for the tattoo removal process to be over built their anticipation of how their life would be different once the tattoos were gone. The following statement is a good example of this:

It just makes me look forward to not being self-conscious about how people view me or about how I view myself either. It's a slow process but it will be rewarding at the end. Just confidence wise I think I'll be more eager to go out and, it sounds so personal you know, but I guess it affects me all around. You're putting yourself through a lot, but its worth it!

For some, the time involved in the tattoo removal process was also a factor in the life changes they were experiencing, as in the following example:

I think its getting better as I go along; it's kinda weird like that. It's kind of like, its kinda too bad you can't just get rid of it all at once, but its kinda, if you think about it logically, everything takes time. And more and more I can feel myself clearing out more. I mean, I was a really bad daily user like four or five years ago, I was in such bad shape. You'd think I could just quit but I still couldn't even though I was like hearing all this stuff (voices). So I just started spreading it out and slowly but surely I just, I just quit. And I had like, a good year. Its still kind of rough and I got off all kinds of, I'm not taking no more, like, mental health medications, so it seems like everything is new to me. So yeah, getting the tattoo removed is kinda like, I'm out of the darkness and into the light kind of thing. Cause it was rough, it was really bad.

Several interviewees, like in the previous example, compared the slow but steady disappearance of their tattoos to the slow but consistent changes happening in their life concurrently. It is as if the change in the appearance of their tattoos is a visual representation of the change in their selves and in their lives.

### **Judgment (“They think bad of me right away”)**

One major factor in the interviewees' decision to have their tattoos removed was the fact that they were often judged unfairly by others because of their tattoos. For example the statement: “It just makes me feel uncomfortable, like people maybe are looking at that instead of maybe at my face”. Another example is:

I think its going to help me out better in the future because like, right now if I apply to a job or something and they see it then they think bad of me right way. I wasn't thinking like, how it was going to look, or how people were going to think about me. And then when I got out (of jail) my parents started telling me it didn't look good and they were kind of disappointed in me.

These two examples demonstrate anxiety that a tattoo can prevent someone else from seeing who a person really is. A tattoo can symbolize so much and become such a distraction that it can elicit negative feelings towards the person who wears it. Judgment from others can not only be uncomfortable, it can be dangerous, as in the following example:

I kept it covered with a band-aid which, cause it was a really small tattoo, but when I had to shower in front of six other girls or five other girls in juvenile hall, you know, I had to take off the band-aid. I kind of let the staff know, hey you know, I've got this tattoo, I'm out of the gang you know, I'm not, I don't want to be a part of it and that kind of thing. I was never jumped in, but it was more of, I was under the influence and I was like, hey I want this tattoo. And that could have got me into trouble. So there was a whole bunch of fear behind this tattoo. With gangs you have to be jumped in and if your not, and if you get a tattoo of that particular gang then they have every right to jump you. So, you know, that just like made me want to get it off even more because I thought in the future you know, I just don't want this conflict.

This interviewee felt that her safety was at risk because she wore the tattoo of a gang that she had never officially been initiated into. For her, being judged by her tattoo not only made her feel uncomfortable, it made her feel real fear.

### Discussion

There were two purposes of this mixed methods study. The first was to use secondary quantitative data analysis to examine the relationship between gender and age and different reasons people give for wanting their tattoos removed upon entering a tattoo removal program. The second purpose of this study was to use qualitative face-to-face interviews to explore in-depth the personal experiences of people who had participated in a tattoo removal program. From both the quantitative data and qualitative interview results the investigator hoped to learn how to a tattoo removal program can best serve its clientele and if tattoo removal alone is enough for them to make the life changes they desire.

### *Summary of Findings*

The quantitative part of the study utilized intake forms for participants in a tattoo removal program. Based on the data analysis, employment was overall the most common reason given for wanting tattoos removed. The data show that women are significantly more likely than men to give employment factors as a reason for wanting their tattoos removed when entering the tattoo removal program. The results also show that men are significantly

more likely than women to give gang related reasons for wanting their tattoos removed, and the people who do give gang related reasons for tattoo removal are significantly younger than the rest of the tattoo removal program participants.

Results from the four face-to-face interviews conducted for the qualitative portion of the study identified four themes: Youth (“It just seemed like the thing to do”), Reminders (“It represented a negative time in my life, Time (“It’s a slow process but it will be rewarding at the end, and Judgment (“They think bad of me right away”).

#### *Results in Relation to Previous Research*

The results support previous research findings that employment is typically the most popular reason given for tattoo removal (Brown et al, 2000; Houghton et al, 1995; Poljac & Burke, 2008; & Putnins, 2007). The mean age of the tattoo removal program participants confirms the idea that tattoos obtained during one’s youth often lead to feelings of regret (Bochenek, 1996). And the significantly younger age of those who want their tattoos removed for gang related reasons supports the research on gang tattoos and gang membership, specifically the notion that once the decision is made to leave a gang leftover remnants of gang membership can be dangerous (Aizenman, 2006; Bochenek, 1996; Rosenwald, 2002).

The personal experiences of the interviewees also confirm previous research findings that the influence of peers and drugs can lead to a quick decision about getting a tattoo during one’s youth (Brown, et al., 2000). For the interviewees their tattoos represented memories from a troubled youth that they wished to forget. The constant reminder of their past mistakes they got whenever they looked at their own tattoos and the critical judgment they received from others contributed to their feelings of regret and the desire to have the tattoos removed,

which is similar to the experience of participants in past studies on tattoo removal (Putnins, 1997). One participant commented specifically on the disappointment his parents felt when they saw his tattoo and how this made him re-think his decision. And for one interviewee in particular, tattoo removal was not only a matter of regret and life change, it was a matter of her physical well-being, and perhaps life or death since she was removing a gang tattoo that she had not earned the right to own by not being formally initiated into the gang. This relates to research that demonstrates how challenging it can be to disassociate from a gang lifestyle (Aizeman, 2006; Bochenek, 1996; Rosenwald, 2002).

The experience of the tattoo removal process for the four interviewees became much more than just removing a picture from their skin. The time it took for their tattoos to fade allowed them to really examine their lives and the other changes that they were making. For one participant, seeing his tattoo fade happened in conjunction to feeling changes in his mental health stability and the gradual decline of his drug use. This speaks to the research done by Bazan et al. that tattoos can symbolize one's identity and a connection to one's cultural environment (2002). As his tattoo disappeared, so did his connection to a lifestyle of drug use and his identity as a person with a mental health problem. Another interviewee commented on how much she looked forward to not feeling the self-consciousness she felt in public because of her tattoo. She looked forward to the reward of going through the process of tattoo removal which meant that others would finally be able to see her for her true identity and not for her old identity as displayed by her tattoo, which as research has shown, is a common feeling for many people who have tattoos removed (Putnins, 1997).

*Putting it All Together: Interpretation of Quantitative and Qualitative Results Combined*

If the results from the four qualitative interviews were to be summed up in terms of the four categories coded for the quantitative data (employment, identity, family, and gang related), the feature issue for the interviewees is identity. All the factors involved in the interviewee's decisions to have their tattoos removed are in relation to the one concern that they are no longer the same person they were when they got their tattoos. Out of the 116 intakes reviewed for the quantitative component of the study, employment was the most common reason given for tattoo removal and the category "identity" fell towards the middle in regards to how often it was given as a reason for tattoo removal, with about 36% of tattoo removal program participants mentioning it on their intakes or in their letters of recommendation.

The disconnect between the quantitative results that show employment as the premier reason given for tattoo removal and the qualitative results that indicate factors of identity in reasons for tattoo removal could suggest that when people interview with tattoo removal program intake personnel they might feel pressured to give a specific kind of reason for wanting their tattoos removed to be accepted into the program. They may also not feel comfortable enough during the intake process to disclose their deep, personal feelings about their tattoos and the other life changes they are also hoping to make. For women in particular, who were more likely to give employment as their reason for removal on their intakes forms, there may be more inclination to give a "good" reason since their tattoos may not be as visible or as offensive as men's tattoos.

The difference in the findings may also speak to the fact that the intakes are completed before the tattoo removal process begins. Since the interviews were done after the process

was already begun or even completed, the interviewees had the benefit of hindsight when looking at how tattoo removal has affected their lives. It could be that when they entered the program they had no idea how much their lives would be impacted by the tattoo removal process. Also, the tattoo removal process itself may have been what elicited change in other areas of their lives, which is not something they could have foreseen when entering the program and completing the intake form.

### *Study Strengths and Limitations*

The findings of this study can be helpful to tattoo removal program personnel in knowing where and how to find program participants. Based on the quantitative results that show the prevalence of tattoo removal program use by young males who are looking to de-identify themselves with gang lifestyle, outreach can be done in youth centers, schools, and juvenile detention facilities to provide information about tattoo removal and recruit participants. Tattoo removal programs could also use this information to build a prevention aspect into their mission statements utilizing participant experiences to educate youth about their own regret in getting tattoos.

The findings are also helpful in that the interviews provide rich information about the individual process of tattoo removal that the intakes forms do not. Based on the four interviews in this study, it can be concluded that individuals who want offensive or gang related tattoos removed also have many other problems in their life they want to change such as drug addiction, mental health problems, and gang affiliation and tattoo removal alone is not enough to make these changes. If the mission of a tattoo removal program is to truly help people and not simply remove their tattoos, then they would best serve their clients by also offering supportive services along the lines of counseling and case management. If a tattoo

removal program is not set up to provide these types of services or lacks the resources to provide them, then they can be prepared with a list of referrals for program participants who are in need.

This study is limited by the fact that the qualitative sample was not random therefore it is not possible to know if the findings are true for the entire population of those who utilize tattoo removal programs. Many more interviews would need to be done with a random sample of participants to know if the personal experience of people who have offensive or gang related tattoos removed is similar for everyone. Something that can help a tattoo removal program to know more about the individual personal experience of its clients is an anonymous questionnaire given to participants upon entering the program and once the tattoo removal is done that asks for more personal information than what is gathered during the intake process.

Another limitation to this study is the narrow margin of demographic information collected with the secondary quantitative data. Initially more demographics were to be looked at such as employment, ethnicity, and gang membership; however the majority of the intakes reviewed did not contain this information. If more demographic information had been collected a clearer picture of who has offensive and gang related tattoos removed and why would be provided. Then it would be possible to know where to reach more participants and how a tattoo removal program can expand itself to fit the needs of its clients.

#### Implications for Social Work

The findings of this study suggest that tattoo removal alone is not enough to elicit some of the life changes desired by those who have gang related and offensive tattoos removed. The symbolism of *removing* something that is known to be *permanent* is the

ultimate statement a person can make that they are committed to changing their life. The field of social work can benefit from research on the tattoo removal process and its outcomes because very often the participants of a tattoo removal program are the same clients service providers work with every day. When working with gang members and at-risk youth in direct practice, service providers demonstrate their cultural knowledge by continually evaluating their own efforts, asking new questions and coming up with new solutions to constantly improve the quality of the services they provide and the relationship they have with their clients (Bochenek, 1996). This study is an example of how people who utilize social services, such as a tattoo removal program, need to be acknowledged as more than just demographics or checked boxes on an intake form; service providers need to find ways to see them as individuals within their societal, cultural, and community environments.

The reasons people give for wanting their tattoos removed and the personal, individual experiences of the individuals who were interviewed for this study paint a picture of marginalization and alienation from society based on having offensive or gang related tattoos (Hutchison and Charlesworth, 2003). The fact that a person can think that they will not be able to find a job based solely on a tattoo illustrates the broader issue of a society that pigeonholes people with tattoos into a group that somehow does not deserve to have what others have (Bazan et al., 2002). For the people whose tattoos have become a terrible reminder of mistakes made in their past and represent an identity of a person they no longer want to be, tattoo removal is a way for them to overcome the stigmatization of offensive and gang related tattoos (Zatz, 1985). Social work can be an important part of overcoming stigmatization because service providers know how people can be judged unfairly for their actions and they have connections to the resources needed to ameliorate the effects of it. For

example, if a tattoo removal program is not able to provide counseling or case management services to its clients who have more needs than just tattoo removal, then they can have a list of referrals ready for clients to know where and how they can get the help they need.

For those youth who choose to obtain gang related tattoos to be accepted into a particular group because they have been previously marginalized from society based on their race and/or citizenship status, the tattoos they get only perpetuate a cycle of oppression (Bazan et al., 2002). As they grow up and begin to enter into their adult lives, their past mistakes are literally written on their bodies for the whole world to see. The messages their tattoos send to those in power confirm the negative attributions already being made against them. With early intervention from service providers in youth centers, schools, and juvenile detention facilities it is possible that these young people in need can be educated about how to overcome their oppressors in a positive way that spreads unity and social justice. Perhaps then instead of removing tattoos that remind them of bitterness and powerlessness, they would be inspired to get tattoos that represent their journey “out of the darkness and into the light” that they would feel proud to display publicly.

From a policy and programs perspective, the field of social work would benefit from future research on the effectiveness of programs that provide outreach services to marginalized, at risk youth in the form of violence prevention, conflict resolution, and drug and alcohol education. If these types of programs are successful in empowering marginalized youth and targeting youth at risk for gang activity, then it is conceivable that the possibility that they will make decisions they will regret later in life may be diminished.

Future research on the topic of tattoo removal should go further in-depth into the individual and personal experience of those who have tattoos removed. For example, if this

was just a qualitative study and consisted of several more interviews, then a lot more could be learned about how gang related and offensive tattoos and tattoo removal can affect someone's life. Qualitative studies on this topic could also compare the different experiences of those who have gang related and offensive tattoos to those whose tattoos are recreational in nature. This would eliminate any kind of bias in the interview questions and coding categories because it would not be assumed that the tattoos have had a negative impact on the participant's lives.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of the relationship between service provider and client. If the tattoo removal program participants in this research were truly wary or afraid of revealing their true feelings about their tattoos during the program intake process, then the program is not actually meeting their needs beyond the physical act of removing their tattoos. With a more thorough, face-to-face intake process that involved more than filling out forms, the participants may be inclined to disclose more personal information which could help the service provider become aware of what their needs are above and beyond just tattoo removal.

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Appendix A

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Phone Script

Investigator: Hello, may I please speak with \_\_\_\_\_? My name is Amy and I am an intern at Catholic Charities working with the tattoo removal program. I am a student at San Jose State University and I am working on a research project on tattoo removal. For part of my research I am interviewing people who have had tattoos removed. The interview will take up to an hour and you will be paid with a \$10 Target gift card afterwards. Would you be interested in being interviewed or would you like to ask any questions before you make a decision?

If “no”: Thank you for your time, goodbye.

If “yes”: Great! I will be doing the interviews on (dates and times TBD). Do any of these days and times work for you?

If “no”: Is there a time when you are available to do the interview over the phone?

If “yes”: Your interview will be on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. The interview will be held at the Catholic Charities counseling offices at 922 Hilby Avenue in Seaside\*. When you come in just ask for Amy. If you need to cancel please leave me a message at 831-393-3113.

\*If a participant does not have transportation to the interview arrangements will be made for the interview to be conducted over the phone.

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Interview #: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender (M/F): \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How do you identify yourself ethnically?

2. Are you employed? \_\_\_\_\_

A. (If yes) What do you do?

3. Has your tattoo(s) been removed completely?

4. What were your reasons for getting the tattoo(s)?

5. What were your reasons for wanting your tattoo(s) removed?

6. Please tell me about how removing your tattoo(s) has affected your life.

7. Has the removal of your tattoo(s) affected your life in ways you did not expect?

A. (If yes) How so?

8. Is there anything else you think I should know?

9. Do you have any questions for me regarding this research or this interview?

Appendix D

Appendix E

Appendix F

Appendix G

Appendix H

### **Agreement to Participate in Research**

**Responsible Investigator:** Amy Deas, SJSU MSW Student

**Title of Protocol:** Reasons Given For and Outcomes of Removing Gang Related and Offensive Tattoos: A Mixed Methods Study

1. You have been asked to participate in a research study investigating two aspects of tattoo removal: the reasons people give for having a tattoo removed, and how their life has changed due to the tattoo removal once the tattoo is gone.
2. If you agree to participate you will be asked to be interviewed by the investigator. The interview will take place on the previously scheduled day and time and will last approximately 60 minutes long. The interview will take place at the Catholic Charities counseling center located at 922 Hilby Avenue, Seaside CA 93955. The interview will be audio recorded if you agree to be recorded and the investigator will take hand written notes during the interview. The investigator will not record the session upon your request. You do not need to bring anything to the interview and will not need any materials during the interview.
3. This research involves minimal risk to the participants. You may feel minor discomfort and could possibly experience emotional distress when talking to the investigator about how tattoo removal has affected your life.
4. There is one possibility for you to directly benefit from engaging in this research. You may benefit from the possible therapeutic quality of talking about their experience having your tattoos removed and expressing into words the way tattoo removal has affected your life.
5. Although the results of this study may be published, no information that could identify you will be included. An assigned ID number will be used in place of your name on audio recordings and all tapes will be destroyed after completion of the study.
6. Compensation for participation in this study will be a \$10 Target gift card upon completion of the interview.

Initial \_\_\_\_\_

7. Questions about this research may be addressed to Amy Deas, 831-393-3113. Complaints about the research may be presented to Peter Allen Lee, Ph.D., MSW Program Coordinator, School of Social Work, (408) 924-5800. Questions about research participants' rights or research related injury may be presented to Pamela Stacks, Ph.D., Associate Vice President, Graduate Studies and Research, at (408) 924-2427.

8. No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose not to participate in the study.

9. Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the entire study or in any part of the study. You have the right to not answer questions you do not wish to answer. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations with San Jose State University or with Catholic Charities.

10. At the time that you sign this consent form, you will receive a copy of it for your records, signed and dated by the investigator.

**The signature of a participant on this document indicates agreement to participate in the study.**

**The signature of a researcher on this document indicates agreement to include the above named participant in the research and attestation that the participant has been fully informed of his or her rights.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date