A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS OF TATTOOING AS A CONTEMPORARY FORM OF INSCRIBED CONFESSION

STYLIANI KOULI | DR. SPYROS GANGAS |
SOCIOLOGY, DEREE – THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF GREECE

Introduction

Tattooing is one of the oldest forms of body modification, with evidence dating back more than 5,000 years. Once associated with deviance, stigma, and marginal social groups, tattoos have increasingly become normalized within contemporary societies. Today, tattooing is widely understood as a form of self-expression and identity construction. However, this study moves beyond dominant cultural explanations to explore a deeper sociological dimension.

Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, this research examines tattooing as a contemporary technology of the self, a practice through which individuals construct, articulate, and regulate their identities. Specifically, it investigates the possibility that tattooing functions as a modern form of **confession**, where personal truths, emotions, and experiences are inscribed on the body.

Research Question

➢ **How and in what ways do tattooed individuals use tattooing to confess, verbalize, and regulate personal truths?**

Theoretical Framework

Foucault's 1980 Dartmouth lectures on the **hermeneutics of the self** provide the lens:

- ***Exomologesis*** (confession): dramatic self-renunciation, tied to pain and penance.
- ***Exagoreusis*** (verbalisation): continuous disclosure of thoughts to a mentor.

Foucault: *"No truth about the self without a sacrifice of the self."*

This study examines how tattooing reshapes these religious practices into secular, embodied confession. Pain becomes a **deliberate ordeal**; the tattoo artist becomes a confessor; the skin becomes a **permanent text** where truth is inscribed, read, and judged.

Methodology

Design

Qualitative, interpretive, social constructionist.

Data collection

- 12 semi-structured interviews (tattooed individuals + artists)
- 1 month participant observation (two studios + Athens Tattoo Convention)
- Photographic documentation of tattoos

Analysis

- Weberian ideal types (value-rational, affectual, etc.)
- Goffman's frame analysis (mourning, aesthetic, therapeutic frames)
- Foucauldian coding (confession, pain as ordeal, power relations)

Sample: Greek, aged 20–40, mixed gender, diverse tattoo experience.

Ethics: ACG approval, informed consent, anonymity.

Key Findings

① **Pain as a deliberate ordeal**

Participants described needle pain as *"good pain… permits you to hurt yourself in a beautiful way"* (PO01) and *"cathartic"* (PO02). Suffering legitimises truth—mirroring Christian mortification, but now chosen, not imposed.

② **The tattoo studio as secular confessional**

Artists routinely ask: *"Why this design? What does it mean?"* Clients—even first-timers—volunteer trauma, loss, and identity narratives. This is *exagoreusis* without a priest: the artist as witness, the skin as sacrament.

③ **The body as autobiographical archive**

PO03 divided his body into themed territories (Greece left, Japan right, Thailand leg). PO04 tattooed a single word: *"discipline"* – her entire life philosophy. Skin becomes a living memoir, readable by self and others.

④ **Hidden confession: managing the audience**

Many hide tattoos (calves for work, covered except at beaches). PO010 noted that older Greek generations openly judge. Liberation coexists with **internalised social control** – a perfect Foucauldian paradox.

⑤ **Impulsivity and regret as late-modern confession**

PO01's impulsive snake tattoo (for a toxic ex) later caused regret. Not failure. In neoliberal societies, confession is no longer about moral closure but **continuous self-exposure, reflection, and revision**. Regret proves the self is an ongoing project.

⑥ **Inscribed recognition – tattoos as social glue**

PO01's *BoJack Horseman* tattoo was recognised by another artist, who revealed her own matching scene. Instant bonding. A private confession becomes a public text that invites mutual recognition and community.

⑦ **The paradox of commodification: studio vs. convention**

The studio: intimate, ritualistic, hard to access – a temple. The Athens Tattoo Convention: fast, transactional, crowded – a market. Tattooing does not inherently resist commodification; it oscillates between depth and surface.

Discussion

Tattooing is a **contemporary technology of the self**: pain as ordeal, verbalisation as disclosure. Unlike Christian confession (which sought absolution), late-modern confession performs an **authentic, revisable self**. Regret is not a flaw but evidence of an ongoing reflexive project.

Crucially, tattooing embodies a double movement: **liberation** (choose your design, meaning, placement) and **discipline** (workplace norms, generational stigma, artist gatekeeping, audience management). The body is both a site of freedom and a surface of power. Tattooing does not simply confess *to* someone; it confesses *through* the skin – a permanent, public text that can be hidden, displayed, regretted, or celebrated. This is Foucault's productive power made ink.

Conclusion

Tattooing reshapes historical confessional practices into subtle, everyday self-work. It allows individuals to inscribe personal truths through pain and verbalisation while navigating social control. This study opens new paths for understanding how embodied practices reconfigure truth-telling about the self in late modern societies.

Keywords:
Foucault | Confession | Tattooing | Sociology of the Body | Technologies of the Self