



PAIN AND THE SKIN-EGO

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Abstract

The skin is the body's physical envelope; Didier Anzieu suggests the skin-ego is a psychic envelope, containing and defining the self: a projection or metaphor of the body's surface. Using interviews and an online questionnaire, this research project explores participants' individual experiences of the physical pain of being tattooed and its interaction with the ego. The responses indicated physical pain was considered to simply be a temporary process facilitating the more significant end result of the tattooed image. For the participants, the image worked to express aspects of their 'self'. A theoretical mechanism is proposed outlining the interplay between pain, image and the skin. It serves to present the skin-ego as a medium of exchange, mimicking the function of the skin, through which the injected ink under the skin, forming an image, facilitates a projection of the ego outwards onto the surface of the skin.

Introduction

"...The skin is a screen and a filter, it is also the medium of passage and exchange, with the attendant possibility of violent reversal or rupture" (Connor 65). The intimate connection between inner and outer conditions is a physical envelope of the body. Didier Anzieu proposes that, in the same way, the skin-ego is a psychic envelope containing and defining the ego, or self. By 'skin-ego', his theory refers to "an image that the child's ego uses during the early stages of development to represent itself on the basis of the child's experience with the surface of the body" (Anzieu 29). "...On the level of pleasure" (31), the skin-ego's support lies in the functions of the skin; functions which the ego "inherits" (30) when working to establish mental barriers and mediate exchanges with the "id, the superego and the outside world" (Anzieu 30). The skin is a protective surface that marks the boundary with the outside; and a "principle means of exchange with others" (30). In this sense, the ego is the inward "projection or metaphor of the body's surface" (Laplanche 82). However, a gap can be identified in Anzieu's theory, with regards to his sole focus on pleasure as skin stimulation without significant reference to pain. Pain has been characterised as a "breaking of barriers" or an "effraction" (Laplanche 82), an attendant possibility given the vulnerability of the skin's surface. Thus, in order to investigate this theoretical gap, the main aim of this project was to explore physical pain as skin stimulation, using interviews and a questionnaire, with regards to different attitudes to and experiences of being tattooed. Anzieu's theory of the skin-ego is a fundamental base for linking pain with our rational ego. Strengthening an understanding of the interplay between the tattooed image, the physical sensation, and a participant's sense of self; this project aimed to advance the Laplanchean critique of psychoanalytic theory by working to close the gap identified in Anzieu's theory of the skin-ego. Furthermore, this research project ultimately contributes to the evolving psychoanalytical knowledge base.

Methodology

Both an anonymous online questionnaire and interviews were used to gain the necessary level of qualitative detail and individuality for this project's aims. Five interviews were conducted and participants were asked the same set of 24 open ended questions. The

progress and focus of the interviews could therefore be maintained by returning to these questions throughout, whilst also allowing for expansion through the use of filler questions which were not pre-set before the interview. This filler technique, whilst diverging from the set questions, worked to enable a more personalised and thorough exploration of their experiences. In this way, each interview could be tailored to the individual, broadening each narrative. An online questionnaire was devised using the same 24 questions in order to gain a wider set of responses, though less detail could be acquired.

The chronology of the project was governed by the availability of each interviewed participant: a disadvantage for this project due to time constraints. In the initial planning stages, three key questions were identified:

- (1) Do modern primitives contribute to the person's sense of identity?
- (2) Are they simply an aesthetic addition to the body?
- (3) Did they find the process of piercing or tattooing the skin painful or pleasurable?

Preliminary reading was carried out based upon these questions to gain a working knowledge of the tradition, culture and origin of tattoos, properties of the skin and existing mechanisms of pain. At this stage, seven interviews had been secured, including performance artist Ron Athey around whom this project was initially planned. However, later during the scheduling correspondence, Ron Athey and another participant declined interview. A process of redirection then took place and the exploration of piercings and performance art could no longer occur; securing more interviews would have delayed the progression of the project further. The questionnaire was posted in six social media groups and shared in three forums. These social platforms were existing online communities of people with tattoos from around the world. A transcript of each recorded interview was typed up and the sixty-five responses from the questionnaire were collated in a spreadsheet and the most relevant were selected. The narratives were then analysed and similarities were outlined between the wide variety of personal responses, before drawing conclusions from these similarities which could then be reflected back into Anzieu's theory of the skin-ego.

Results

- (1) Painful: yes or no?
- (2) The significance of the images and what they convey.
- (3) Identity.
- (4) Relationship to the pain.

- (1) All 70 participants categorically stated that the physical process and sensation of being tattooed is painful or at least uncomfortable. However, some were able to cope with and endure the pain more successfully than others. Responses ranged from hysterical panic attacks at the sight of the needle to falling asleep during a 4 hour session. Thus, the word 'painful' itself is inadequate to categorise the diversity of reactions to the physical sensation of being tattooed.

- (2) When asked which was more significant for them, the physical sensation of getting a tattoo, the meaning behind the image (if applicable), or the aesthetics of the image, each participant ranked the pain as least significant. T, E and G, whilst acknowledging the importance of the aesthetic of the image, ranked the emotional connection to the image as most significant. Both E and G's tattoos work as markers or symbols of emotional pain they have overcome, whereas T's tattoos celebrate a time in his life. K ranked the aesthetics of his tattoo, which covers his whole body, as most significant because he regards the acquisition of tattoos as the collection of art. The aesthetics of L's tattoos were more of a personal indulgence. Overall, including the questionnaire responses, the participants rated aesthetics as most significant. However, those who had symbolic tattoos either put meaning first or rated the two aspects equal. Moreover, because of the temporary nature of the pain and the permanency of the image, the scratching and injecting of the skin cannot be the only aspect of being tattooed which can interact with the ego, or self, as might be predicted using Anzieu's theory as a base. The significance image must be accounted for.
- (3) All five interviewees stated their tattoos were part of their identity. To quote G: "yes as it is on my body, it is part of me now." A questionnaire response suggested the tattoos become part of a person as soon as the stencil touches the skin. K considers himself to be a "living, breathing, walking, talking piece of body art" which implies his tattoo and self are one; his growing collection of art, for him, contributes to the evolution of both his self and his body. However, E responded that her tattoos were with her before she had them, in the events they symbolise: the tattoos are her story. This serves to suggest that her tattoos are not an *addition* to her identity, they express aspects of her 'self' existing before she had the tattoo. G similarly elaborated, "they express an aspect of myself. So they express my 'self' and are therefore part of me". Both responses work to indicate that - unlike in Anzieu's theory which suggests the pleasurable associations of a mother's touch on the skin define our ego - their 'self' is able to be expressed through the images rather than be defined by them. Their *self* defines the images. The majority of participants stated that neither the pain nor images had any transformative effects – they felt the process did not change them as a person.
- (4) Each individual has a unique relationship to the pain they experience when being tattooed. For G the pain is a challenge, something to overcome, but is also "an aspect or quality of the medium itself". Whereas for K, whose longest session was fourteen hours, felt the pain was something to be respected and accepted. E's relationship to the pain differed with the meaning of her tattoos, most significantly the pain acted as a release of intense emotion or closure, and in some cases she welcomed the pain. Moreover, T will never have another tattoo because he cannot put himself through the pain again. One questionnaire response, however, summarises the conclusion that can be drawn from this category. "You need the pain to remind you that it's a big deal, what's happening, you're altering your body. It's important not to forget that, and to have to go through a process to get the reward." Another common response was that one earns the right to cover the skin by enduring this pain. Although the individual relationships to the pain differ, each participant acknowledged they put themselves through the pain for the end result. Again,

this highlights the significance of the permanent and desirable image as opposed to the often excruciating yet temporary physical pain. K outlined the culture of 'no pain no gain' amongst those with tattoos which indicates a widespread opinion that in order to permanently change the body you must voluntarily endure the pain: image as reward. To have a tattoo is to take control of one's own body and self; the end result provides motivation to withstand the pain, which is forgotten as soon as the image is completed.

Conclusion and outcome

In tattooing, the two components, pain and the image, cannot exist without each other. Image induces pain, pain facilitates image, and image rewards pain (4). This interplay itself occurs above and below the surface of the skin which is scratched and injected with ink. Mimicking the biological function of the skin, as a "medium of passage and exchange" of substances in and out of the body (Connor 65); the skin-ego, Anzieu's psychic envelope of the ego, works as a passage for the representation and expression of the self. The ink permeates the boundary of the skin to create an image loaded with emotional or aesthetic value, causing physical pain. Simultaneously, the image itself facilitates the expression of an aspect of the self on the surface of the skin (4). Freud and Anzieu's conception of the ego as the inward "projection or metaphor of the body's surface" (Laplanche 82) is reversed: the ego, or self, is projected outwards onto the surface of the skin in a symbolic image. As a result, they are part of the self (3). The physical pain facilitates the acquisition of this image on the surface of the skin through the injection of ink. Unlike the unconscious exchange occurring across the surface of the skin, this projection of the ego outwards onto the surface is a voluntary decision.

Furthermore, this theoretical mechanism proposes an interplay of exchange across the surface of the skin-ego, matching the biological function of the skin, in which pain facilitates image, and image gives rise to the projection of the ego onto the surface of the skin. The gap in Anzieu's theory which does not account for an interaction between physical pain on the surface of the skin and the ego itself has been investigated. However, because of the specificity of the medium of tattooing, this theoretical mechanism cannot be applied to any other forms of physical pain. The significance of the image, cannot be ignored. Moreover, as Melzack states, "pain is not simply a function of the amount of bodily damage alone" (27). The quality of pain we experience is also determined by our ability to understand the cause of pain and its consequences. Thus, for the participants the pain was endured because of the end result. Whereas, with other forms of pain or abuse of the skin's surface, participants may have responded differently. The cause and consequences of the pain would be different, as would the interaction of pain and the skin with the ego.

The experience of taking on the research, being self-led, was challenging. With more time, this research could be expanded to include piercing, burning and branding the body. Whilst this project initially aimed to investigate the *effect* of physical pain on the ego - the significance of the tattooed image itself was not something focused upon initially - the final outcome is something I did not expect to find. With this in mind, this research project ventured outside my initial predictions and direction, based on the responses I received.

Plans for the dissemination of my research conclusions are yet to take place. However, an abstract for this project will be displayed on my Undergraduate Research Support Scheme (URSS) online profile available to the general public. Further to this, an academic poster of my findings will be made to be displayed in the English Department hallway, which will also be available to view on my URSS profile. This poster will also be on display in November at the URSS showcase day for the general public to view. The project supervisor, Christian Smith, co-convenes the EN335: Literature and Psychoanalysis module: he will include my conclusions in this year's Moodle during the 'Skin-ego' section of the module content.

References

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Supplementary information

Link to online questionnaire: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/16-17SesJqAIFin8j6UBC7AEApUiE61ip8TbWO_XHmDQ/viewform



ABOVE: One of G's four tattoos: an upper back single-line outline of a world map in which G has a small black 'x' added to each country he visits. This tattoo is ongoing.

BELOW: K's one tattoo covers his whole body. The images range from personal tribal symbols and detailed animal work to having his eyeballs tattooed. K considers himself to be a "living, breathing, walking, talking piece of body art".

