

# Tattoos from a Psychoanalytical Perspective

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Tattoos are a multi-layered phenomenon, not only in the very concrete sense that they are placed in deep layers of skin and yet are still visible from the outside, or that some of their colour is distributed throughout the body, but also in their psychological meaning and symbolism. Both consciously and unconsciously, they have many implications. There is an extensive sociological, historical and psychological literature on the subject of tattooing, which, interestingly enough, deals almost without exception with the conscious meaning of tattoos. The tattoo tempts us, so to speak, to perceive only the conscious and concrete. In the present text a psychoanalytical perspective is adopted, which makes central the question of the unconscious implications.

Jamal is in his mid-20s when I meet him. Shortly after the start of his analysis – four hours weekly on the couch – which he started because of depressive moods and a suspected diagnosis of ADHD, he has to go abroad for a few months to study. In his shared flat there he comes into conflict with a roommate; he is lonely and abandoned. He decides to get a tattoo: the frame of an empty picture. During the tattooing and afterwards, Jamal later tells me, he already felt better, calmer and more relaxed inside. He thinks the tattoo is ‘beautiful’; he doesn't really know why he came up with an empty picture.

Far away from home, lonely and abandoned by his girlfriend and his analyst, at the same time tormented by his anger towards his new roommate, he makes the decision to get a tattoo. The painful process already brings relief, the resulting image calms him down deeply. Jamal is probably in a similar situation to many seafarers, football players, people in prison or psychoanalytic treatment: too much closeness in relationships triggers strong unconscious, e.g. sexual or aggressive, emotions. At the same time, the great – inner or outer – distance from the original family or home leads to fear of abandonment and loss. Both trigger a massive shake-up of inner security, borders and identity. Through the tattoo Jamal can temporarily regain this security and try to establish his sense of identity.

When I looked into the unconscious causes of this phenomenon, on the basis of patients who had tattoos during analysis (Karacaolan, 2012), I came to the conclusion that there is an action and a pictorial side to tattooing.

With regard to the action side of tattooing, I assume with Bick (1968) that the manipulation of one's own skin through tattooing represents at an early level an attempt to experience a holding and circumscribing object in a very concrete way. In doing so, tattooing shifts an unbearable affect into the painful injuring of one's own body, so making it bearable. Seen from this perspective, tattooing is a borderline symptom, even if it is widespread. Once the injured skin has healed, the tattoo is tactilely and sensorily integrated into the body. Gaddini (1969), starting from Freud's (1923) reflections on the physical rootedness of the ego, sees the skin as the fragile border of the self and describes how early childhood development in the second half of the first year of life is about a first separation from the mother, the point in time when the transitional object (Winnicott, 1951) takes on meaning. If at this very moment it is psychologically impossible to progress developmentally, e.g. because of a disturbed contact with the mother, then a somatic pathology manifests in the skin, an atopic dermatitis, arising as an expression of this problem. Gaddini interprets dermatitis as a defence which reveals that the limit of one's own skin (the separated self) is incapable of ‘holding’ and protecting its contents. As a result, while the need for the Other remains constant and inevitable, the Other is regarded only as a

functional limit of the Self. By injecting colour into the skin, which is associated with pain, the tattoo artificially causes dermatitis, which must heal over a period of several days or weeks before the finished image is created. During this period, the injured skin must be cared for, anointed and specially treated. At this level, the process of being tattooed can be understood, on the one hand, as an act which attempts to represent an early deficiency and to make up for it through one's own activity, and on the other hand could be seen as an attempt to concretely repair the body image.

In general, with a successful separation, the idea is formed of an inner space circumscribed by a boundary, and an outer unlimited space beyond this boundary. The prerequisite for a person being able to be tattooed is now the unconscious idea of having their own body, which represents a unity, delimits the outer boundary, and to which they can give a meaning, thus having a screen onto which they can project an unconscious image and present it to the outside. In states of fragmentation, such as in acute psychosis, this is no longer the case: the body image is broken into individual parts (Pankow, 1974), which are difficult or impossible to relate to each other, so that one can assume that people in an acute psychotic condition 'cannot' be tattooed. The concept of the body image goes back to the Viennese psychoanalyst Paul Schilder (1935), who summarized under the concept a complex function of mental experience, which is physiologically based, libidinally charged (cathexed) and embedded in the network of organism-environment-relationships. The body image is based on phantasies and activity patterns that are formed, discarded and transformed in relationship with the outside world and the drives. It is an active, lifelong process. The term image is not to be understood literally or optically, but as the entirety of psychic charges (cathexes) and representations of physical experience. Angelergues (1975) sees the body image as a process involving symbolic notions of a border, which has the function of both a stabilizing image and a protective shell. Seen from this perspective, the body becomes a charged object and the body image the result of this charging, which – except in a state of delusion – is irreplaceable and must remain intact at all costs. The concept of the body image as it is further developed by Gisela Pankow (1974) is a useful perspective – a useful simplification, so to speak – for the direct translation of psychic phantasms into complexes of meaning, which in turn first makes a representation of unconscious zones of destruction possible. In its three-dimensionality, the body is the object par excellence that makes spatial conceptions palpable. Through the actively interpreted, physical perception of sensory data, an inner image of the body in space is constantly, unconsciously constructed, forming the basis for inner orientation, perception of reality and the generation of hypotheses about the environment. If there is an unconscious image of a unified body with a boundary that separates an inner from an outer space, this outer shell can be charged with fantasies, and thus, in situations of psychological regression when the transition space is threatened with collapse, inner security can be regained by a tattoo.

Since the object created in the form of the tattoo remains a part of the subject's own body, the act of tattooing is an only partially successful attempt to create a transitional object. The point in time when the need for a tattoo arises is when the transitional space threatens to collapse, so to speak, i.e. it is not working at the moment. The need for static equilibrium and immutability seems to be important, as if the tattoo is there to bring a regressive sucking to a stop, thereby fixing a 'safe' distance to the object and so creating a secure hold. The intention is in this way to stop a regressive sucking, such as can be triggered, in analytical terms, by the transference and which pushes either towards too little distance or too much distance. In trying to cover up the feeling of missing or fragile identity, the tattoo disguises itself as an expression of individuality, although in the search for a halt the chosen image unconsciously orientates itself on care-giving or transference figures, usually the parents, and their meaning for the person who is being tattooed. The tattoo in itself is actually rigid; it does not allow any movement and permits almost no transitional space.

Besides the action side, the pictorial side of the tattoo is also important. The tattoo is an image that of course has an unconscious meaning besides the conscious one, and brings with it a metaphorical function. Freud mentions the phenomenon of tattoos in 'Totem and Taboo' (1912/13), where he describes how people carve the image of a totem animal into themselves. This totem is usually an animal species that acts as a progenitor and protective spirit. Interestingly, the totem is hereditary through either the maternal or the paternal line and is associated with exogamy, so that it regulates the prohibition of incest among primitive peoples. The totem animal must not be killed or consumed, and this taboo forms the core of totemism. The sources of taboo belief lie in the fear of the effect of demonic forces, which are to be understood as unconscious desires for forbidden action, projected into the environment. The taboo is bound to a magical prohibition against touch, which is an expression of the system that governs the animistic thinking of totemic cultures. The underlying principle is that of the omnipotence of thoughts. Freud makes the connection to obsessive-compulsive disorder and other forms of neurosis and paranoia, in which the omnipotence of thoughts also magically prevails. When the inner hold is threatened by an unconsciously feared breaking of the taboo, where drive wishes and fear of abandonment or fusion become unbearable, the tattoo is an attempt to magically avert this breaking of the taboo. At the same time, the tattoo unconsciously depicts the theme of breaking the taboo.

Jamal's picture of emptiness probably shows how he unconsciously experiences himself as empty and without meaning, unable to recognize himself. At the same time it is a picture of the emptiness of the strange world he is in. It is always only about the framework, that he attends good schools and performs well, never about his feelings. At the time of the tattoo, the analysis is also only an empty frame in the distance, with which he cannot do anything. The tattoo can thus be understood as an expression of the transference. At its deepest, it shows how Jamal experiences himself in relation to his primary objects: empty, without contours, without identity, without face. Jamal has almost completely broken off contact with his parents, has withdrawn into emptiness. An unburdening emptiness, as if his tattoo was an image for his unconscious desire to be a blank sheet of paper, without history or feelings. This also expresses his 'ADHD symptom': his brain remains empty like the picture, he cannot read a book and cannot remember anything. Correspondingly, especially at the beginning of the analysis, he feels very distant and triggers a basic feeling of emptiness in me; everything seems to slide off him. He is very suspicious and tries to show nothing of himself, to remain invisible. Only in the further course of the treatment does it become apparent how he is permanently occupied with homosexual fantasies, how he experiences himself as a woman and is insecure in his sexual identity. When he felt the urge to get the tattoo, he felt sexually attracted to the same roommate with whom he then became so angry.

This is how Jamal's tattoo sums up his current situation: pictorially, against the background of his central unconscious, inner conflicts. Like a snapshot, it dialectically condenses the mother and father relationship, the desire for closeness and distance, taboo and breaking the taboo, equality and difference, identification and individuation.

The need for a tattoo arises when the inner distance to the object becomes either too small or too great — or when both are the case at the same time. The tattoo is meant to fix a 'safe' distance and thus provide a secure hold. In this way, the body can once again become the starting point for psychological activity. In the course of his analysis Jamal is able to maintain a functioning transitional space, with the increasing ability to represent his affects and perceive feelings, and so he does not feel the need for further tattoos.

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