Visual CRIMINOLOGY
Symbols & Tattoos
Symbolic Interactionism
The body as a symbol
Impression Management
Identity Work
Stigma
Tattoos
This lecture draws upon symbolic interactionism & dramaturgy theory to frame representation & construction of identity through symbols with a particular focus on tattoos.
Meanings are constructed & made sense of through interaction with others

One cannot truly understand meanings unless they also come to understand situational & cultural contexts in which those meanings develop
Weber’s work shaped social meanings into theory - part of interactionism theories to explain crime & deviance.

Symbolic interactionism grew out of American philosophical tradition of pragmatism - late 19th century & originated from George Herbert Mead’s work.

Humans form concept of themselves by interacting with others & developed a reflexive awareness of how they are viewed by others & made possible through symbols people share.

Language consists of symbols to communicate meaningfully. Through communication, humans take on perspective of others & construct their behaviour accordingly.
Sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in & through the defining activities of people as they interact

Blumer, 1969:5
Individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them
Meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals & society
Meanings are continuously created & recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others
Dramaturgy

Erving Goffman - dramaturgy theory portrayed people as actors, whose actions are shaped by type of interaction with others

Dramaturgy - self is a product of dramatic interaction. When individuals interact they present a ‘self’ that will be accepted by others

Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* focused on tension between our inner self & the socialised self (where people expect us to act differently)
Human beings spend a great deal of time interpreting their own conduct & that of others, striving to make sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves so that they can act effectively in them.

(Hewitt, 1991:24)
Goffman’s dramaturgy theory highlights Impression Management

Individuals “guided by their respective identities, develop images of one another” (Hewitt, 1991:139)

Individuals want to convey positive images of themselves & receive positive appraisals

Using impression management techniques attempting to control representation & perception
Impression Management

We try to talk and act in certain ways, or to avoid talking & acting in certain ways, so that others will form desired impressions of us & our current situation (Sandstrom et. al., 2003:109)

Impression management is selective self-presentation (Collett, 2005)
Whenever we interact with others, we emphasise some of our social & personal characteristics while downplaying or concealing others (Sandstrom et al., 2003:109)

Consider how social media is used for impression management
The body is:
A prime symbol of self but also of society
What we have & yet also what we are
both subject & object

The body is:

Both individual & personal - unique & yet common to all humanity

Both an individual creation (phenomenologically & physically) & cultural product

Personal & also state property

Symbolic interactionism frames the situational nature of identity.

An identity which is formed & given meaning through interacting with others.

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*Stone, 1962: 367-368 quoted in Vryana et al., 2003*
Meanings ascribed to symbols vary depending on situational construction.
This week's material draws upon symbolic interactionism theory to frame representation and construction of identity through symbols with a particular focus on tattoos.
Tattoos

Practiced in ancient cultures (Greece, Rome & Egypt - Pazyryk mummies 6th century - 2nd century B.C.) & 5,000 year old ice man found near Alps (Armstrong, 1991; Koch et al., 2000; Schildkrout, 2004)

Tattooing is most ancient & widely practiced form of permanent body alteration (Sanders, 1988:400)
Tattooing has four functions:

- Ritual function
- Apotropaic (protective) function
- Identificatory function
- Decorative function

Blanchard (1994)
Symbols

Tattoos

Ritual Function

When an individual (usually male) goes through a rite of passage

Blanchard (1994)
A muay thai fighter with full back sak yant (magical tattoo) which were traditionally done by monks & believed to have special powers, which were passed on to the bearer of the sak yant.

Blanchard (1994)
Symbols

Tattoos

Identificatory Function

When an individual asserts his/her participation in group, sect or gang

Blanchard (1994)

However, this identificatory function is not always assertive & voluntary - Jewish Prisoners in Auschwitz

Tattoo tools used in Auschwitz
Symbols

Decorative Function

Tattoos
Samoan tradition for over 2,000 years & integral part of social culture.  

Modern-day English word ‘tattoo’ thought to have originated from Samoan ‘tatau’  

Handmade tools: turtle shell & boar’s teeth. Traditional Samoan tattoos take weeks to complete  

Tattooing ceremonies (pe’a) including marking an individual’s ascension to chief within community  

Tattoo covers body from waist to knees  

Symbolises authority & social status
According to Goffman, link between impression management & stigma

An individual must decide:
“to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where”

(Goffman 1963:57)

Individual may need to alter aspects of their appearance dependent upon interactional cues that they pick up on during interaction process with others

Whether intentional or unintentional, meanings are shared & interpreted through tattoos that serve as a symbolic representation. Something which is used to stand for something else

(Sandstrom, Martin, & Fine, 2003)
Goffman’s concept of stigma frequently used with the management of a particular stigmatising identity

Also:

Dovidio et al. (2003)  
“Stigma is a social construction that involves the recognition of difference based on some distinguishing characteristic, or mark”

Stafford & Scott (1986)  
“a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit”

Crocker, Major, & Steele (1998)  
“stigmatised individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context”
Tattoo stigma depends on social setting

“Choosing to tattoo one’s body in this way changes the individuals experience of his or her physical self and has significant potential for altering social interaction”  (Sanders, 1988:397)

Stigma

“The negative social definition is usually not shared by members of the subcultural reference groups with which the tattooed individual interacts or identifies”  (Sanders, 1985:18)

“It is voluntary stigma that symbolically isolates the bearer from “normals”. Since tattooees are deemed to be responsible for their “deviant” physical condition, the mark is especially discrediting”  (Sanders, 1988:397)
The Yakuza involved in history of Tebori—
a traditional & highly skilled form of Japanese tattooing—
Bamboo or steel instrument to hand-poke ink into skin. The method is symbolic & emphasises strength of individual being tattooed.
Designs include:

**Japanese mythology** - most common form & symbolic

**Shisa (lion & dog)** Symbol of protection against evil

**Koi fish** - symbols of prosperity, wealth, & longevity.

**Samurai** - symbol of tradition, courage & respect. Usually wearing full armour with katana.

**Phoenix** - symbol of rejuvenation & rebirth. Represents life change & readiness to make the most of existence.
Symbolic interactionism theory provides a framework for the representation & construction of identity through symbols including tattoos & body modification

Meanings ascribed to symbols are made sense of through interaction with others & vary depending on situational construction

Symbolic interactionism frames situational nature of identity, which is formed & given meaning through interacting

Individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them

The body is what we have & yet also what we are both subject & object

Impression management techniques are employed by individuals to minimise stigma, control representation & perception whereby aspects of appearance depends on cues picked up on during interaction process
Visual CRIMINOLOGY
Symbols & Tattoos

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