

- What is their personal reaction to the idea of body tattoos?
- Do they have any tattoos?
  - If they do, what kind do they have and why that particular design?
  - Why did they get a tattoo?
- What was the process in making a decision to get or not to get a tattoo?
- What are the beliefs and values they hold regarding tattoos? What are these beliefs based on?

From there the leadership team would move to what they know about the practice of tattooing within the youth group and the broader youth culture and how they know it. This, again, is a starting approach and allows youth workers to set out their assumptions and preconceived ideas about tattoos.

### **“IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHO I AM, LOOK AT MY TATTOO”**

Recently I was at my local Home Depot buying materials for a fence. As the young man helped load my construction materials, I noticed he had many intricate tattoos on his legs and arms. Fortunately, for me, I’d bought a lot of lumber, and it took Ted 10 to 15 minutes to load it all into my Jeep. In that amount of time, I was able to learn a lot about Ted’s love of tattoos, as well as his love of art and Minnesota.

He explained how he spends months researching each new tattoo. Many of the tattoos reflect his love of Minnesota and the outdoors (for example, a tattoo of the map of Minnesota, a loon, and so on). Once he makes a decision about a new tattoo, he sets up a consultation with one of the three tattoo artists he uses to discuss and plan what the tattoo will look like and where it will be placed on his body. Once he is satisfied, he then sets up the necessary appointment(s) to complete the tattoo.

As I listened to him speak with pride and enthusiasm about the artwork on his body, I got a glimpse into how Ted used tattoos to express his personality. It reminded me of times when I’ve asked my students to draw a rough outline of their bodies and then fill in those outlines with symbols representing their experiences, values, or beliefs. Tattooing was a way for Ted to say, “This is who I am and this is what’s important to me.”

Most young people don’t go through the elaborate process that Ted does, but tattooing is a way they can engage in self-expression. Tattoos have been a part of many cultures for thousands of years. Archaeologists have found Egyptian mummies with tattoos and tattooing implements dating back to around 2000 BC. In all of the evidence discovered thus far, it appears that women received the tattoos, which served as “amulets, status symbols, declarations of love, signs of religious beliefs, adornments, and even forms of punishment” (Lineberry 2007).



The contemporary art form among North American youth and young adults has its own particular expression. The data on tattoos presents some interesting findings. Statistics show that one to eight percent of youth have at least one tattoo. Between the ages of 18 and 29, however, there is a significant increase, with roughly one in three young people having at least one tattoo (Brown, Perlmutter, and McDermott 2000; Youth Culture 2001). Surveys have also found that young women are more likely than young men to get tattoos, with three out of five tattoos going to women (Youth Culture 2001).

A Youth Culture report (2001) on youth piercings and tattoos found that there is a strong correlation between teens with tattoos and their use of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana. There is also a strong correlation between tattooing and other risk-taking activities, preference for particular music styles (heavy metal, for example), and an increased tendency to hang out with friends.

The matter of Christians getting tattoos is hotly debated. Some believe tattooing dishonors God and the body as God's temple. Others believe tattooing is a personal decision and doesn't automatically dishonor God or a person's witness. The most frequent Scripture cited against tattooing is Leviticus 19:28. This verse discusses the

surrounding pagan countries' practice of marking the dead, which was common in ancient Palestine. But the passage as a whole talks about the many practices that God cautions the Israelites to avoid so they can maintain their covenant relationship with God, proclaim the one true God to the nations around them, and be holy and set apart. The emphasis here is on honoring God.

Christians today aren't bound by many of the Old Testament laws set forth in Leviticus. For example, we eat pork and shellfish, which is forbidden in Levitical law. This is not to say that tattoos are appropriate for youth and youth workers, but that each youth group must wrestle in their own context and community to consider what appropriately honors God and self (Gerwig 2007).

“Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord.” —Leviticus 19:28

As youth groups reflect and consider the contemporary practice of tattooing, two questions should be a part of the consideration. First, what is an appropriate practice regarding youth leaders and tattoos? Suppose a devout church member in his 40s with a tattoo on his arm—a leftover from his days in the military 15 years ago—volunteers to work with the youth. Should he be allowed to volunteer? What about the young female volunteer and recent college graduate who has a cross tattoo on her ankle—should she be allowed to volunteer?

Second, what is an appropriate teaching practice regarding tattoos for teens? Using the ethnographic process outlined in this chapter, youth leaders should establish a plan that is based on their particular context and community. Chuck Gerwig, a pastor of students and families in Southern California, has developed a list of questions for

students to review as they consider getting a tattoo. These questions can be helpful to you as you work through the process of developing an appropriate theological perspective:

- Am I legally old enough to get a tattoo?
- If I live with my parents, would my parents support my decision?
- Would I be defying my parents' God-given authority over me?
- Would I still want this particular image when I get older?
- What if my future mate wouldn't like seeing this image for a lifetime?
- Would this tattoo be in an area of my body that would be plainly visible? Many people **do** unfairly judge people with tattoos as being "second-class."
- Would this image bring God glory?
- Do I feel **fully** convinced that tattoos are allowable for Christians? (Gerwig 2007)

### Food for Thought

*How important is it for you to develop a "theology" of tattoos? How do you evaluate the impact of having a tattoo?*

## Strengthened, Imposed Etic: What Can I Expect to See?

This next step in the S. E. E. Spiral moves from initial perspectives to data gathering. At this point, the intent is to gather supporting background information that will help youth leaders gain greater perspective on a particular phenomenon of culture. Possible sources for gathering information might include:

- Youth culture online resources
- Youth ministry and youth culture books, magazines, and other print resources, such as newspapers
- Expert opinions regarding the particular cultural product (for example, talking to tattoo artists regarding the practice of tattooing)
- Opinions of others who might have insight into a cultural practice (for example, youth pastors, parents, teachers, school administrators, and so on)

This can be a formal or informal process, as warranted by the particular aspect of culture. The goal is to strengthen knowledge and understanding from an outsider's perspective.

## Local Emic: What Do I See and Hear Around Me?

The third step in the S. E. E. Spiral involves getting a firsthand look at the particular cultural dynamic. It is at this stage that outside knowledge is integrated with personal—inside—experience. The data gathering at this stage comes from actual personal interactions with young people and might include: