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SAINTS AND SINNERS: ELITE TATTOO COLLECTORS AND TATTOOISTS AS POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE DEVIANTS

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Arguing that the deviance literature has presented an overly negative image of norm breaking, some researchers in the 1980s and 1990s began to argue for a category of positive deviance that included studies of individuals who exceed social norms (Ben-Yehuda 1990; Dodge 1985; Heckert 1989, 1997, 1998). The positive deviance perspective inspired several strong theoretical statements suggesting that deviance can only be conceptualized as a negative response to norm breaking (Best and Luckenbill 1982; Goode 1991; Sagarin 1985). The result is a schism between researchers studying positive deviants and those investigating negative deviants. This article looks at two groups within the most elite realm of tattooing, tattoo collectors and tattooists, and identifies how they use both positive and negative deviant attributes to maintain a privileged status on the fringe of society. By exploring an example of individuals who exceed and fall below social norms, I offer two new categories of positive deviance: high culture icon and popular celebrity. In addition, I examine how individuals who occupy both positive and negative deviant statuses challenge assumptions within normative and social response

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perspectives of deviants and point to larger processes of social change and social stability.

Since the rise and burgeoning of the labeling perspective in the 1960s and 1970s, the field of deviance has become a highly polemical terrain marked by many lively debates. Not the least of these are the arguments surrounding what is known as positive and negative deviance (cf. Best and Luckenbill 1982; Goode 1991; Sagarin 1985). Such trademark concepts as primary and secondary deviance (Lemert 1967), labeling (Becker 1963), retrospective interpretation (Kitsuse 1962), master status and auxiliary traits (Hughes 1945), degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel 1956), and dramatization of evil (Tannenbaum 1938) have encouraged the negative deviance perspective and supported the idea that deviants are norm breakers treated as inferior to conventional individuals. Advocates of positive deviance (Ben-Yehuda 1990; Dodge 1985) have argued that norm breaking is not inherently negative and have looked at positive deviants as those who "exceed social norms" (Heckert 1989). To date, this debate has led to the development of two divergent literatures: one that identifies numerous types of negative deviants and the other illustrating a few cases of positive deviants (Ewald and Jiobu 1985; Heckert 1989; Hughes and Coakley 1991; Huryn 1986; Jones 1998). What are missing are examples of individuals who cross this conceptual divide and simultaneously function as positive and negative deviants.

This article bridges this gap in our knowledge by identifying individuals who surpass and fall below social norms. While conducting a participant observation study of tattoos and tattooing in the 1990s and early 2000s, I had the chance to interact within an elite tattoo realm.¹ Two

¹DeMello (2000:3) pointed to the hierarchical divisions within the tattoo community by arguing that "the community is open to all tattooed people, yet it is also hierarchical: stratified by class and status. . . . The tattoo community is a real community in the sense that it is experienced by tattooed people across the country; and yet it is differentiated, by class and status among other features, such that it often seems to exist in pieces more than as a whole." Consistent with this vision, this study focuses on members who make up the highest status group within the larger world of tattoo collection.

social types make up the elite tattoo world. The first type is the elite collector. Individuals in this social group are not just collectors in the sense that they are covering their bodies with one or more tattoos (cf. Vail 1999b). They represent a subset of heavily tattooed individuals who desire the best art available,² pay many thousands of dollars for their tattoos, and travel to cities around the United States, Europe, Japan, or Australia to acquire pieces from famous artists. This group proves to be an exclusive one, as few individuals in the tattoo world can afford the \$100 to \$250 per hour fee charged by famous artists. Professional tattoo artists, who produce the work so highly coveted by elite collectors,³ make up the second group in the elite tattoo world. Tattoo artists are among the few who can afford the high cost of tattoos; hence, members of this group make up the vast majority of the tattoo elites. In addition, most elite collectors who are not tattooists see themselves as experts in all aspects of elite tattooing, including possessing detailed knowledge about elite tattooists' careers and familiarity with the organization and techniques of the tattoo profession. Thus, the boundaries between the two groups in the upper echelons of tattooing are exceptionally thin and vague.

Members of the tattoo elite solicit mixed responses from others. Some observers are transfixed by tattooees' "embodied art" and their novel approach to art collection. Others find them vile and disgusting. In this article, I argue that elite collectors and tattooists represent an example of simultaneous positive and negative deviants because they combine a conflicting set of norms and values *and* inspire a variety of responses from others.

²In the world of professional tattooing, artists considered the best are usually those who receive attention in tattoo magazines and those who have good reputations among other professional tattooists.

³As DeMello (1993) noted, there are several realms of tattooing, including street, semi-professional, and professional. While many street and convict tattooists are extremely skilled and produce fine examples of tattoo work, tattooists working in custom shops rarely elevate or recognize the work of these artists. In addition, few tattoo magazine writers showcase these artists. Therefore, in the professional sphere of tattooing, only professional artists become "known" for their tattoo art.

Tattoo researchers working in the 1990s and 2000s suggested that, like many subcultures (cf. Fox 1987), tattoo worlds remain rigidly divided between core and peripheral social members (DeMello 2000; Vail 1999a, 1999b). On the outskirts of the tattoo scene are a group of middle class and largely conventional individuals who see getting tattoos as fun, hip, and trendy (Irwin 2001). While these fashion conscious tattooees provide a broad base of support for tattoos within mainstream social groups, they ultimately select the smallest and most innocuous tattoos possible. Their cooption of this once edgy and deviant activity affords them the lowest status within the tattoo world. Avant garde tattooees represent a more revered group within the subculture. Interested in setting themselves apart from hip and trendy circles, avant garde individuals find themselves getting larger, more extreme tattoos (Irwin 2000). However, lack of resources and interest in having their master status determined by their tattoos keep avant garde collectors from covering their bodies with art.

Elite collectors and tattoo artists rest at the core of the tattoo world. They are not only dedicated to completing their "body suits," they are also interested in acquiring and producing the best, most expensive, and prestigious tattoos available. In this way, they serve as the trend setters within the world of professional tattooing. In this paper, I examine how elite collectors and tattooists' status as positive and negative deviants played on these social divisions within and between tattoo worlds and how simultaneous positive and negative deviance statuses are tied to the structure of fringe social groups and conventional society.

To examine how tattooees and artists are both positive and negative deviants, I first describe how I came to study the topic of tattoos and discuss the nature of my role among a group of elite collectors and artists. Then I frame members of this group as elite deviants who balance negative and positive deviance traits. I suggest that deviance is both a function of how individuals are placed vis-à-vis conventional norms and values and how others respond to their activities. After laying out the ways that elite collectors and tattooists represent both negative and positive deviants, I suggest that elite collectors and tattooists point to two new types of positive deviance: high culture icon and popular celebrity. I also

argue that these two new categories point to ways that normative and social reaction definitions of deviance might be combined. Finally, I argue that simultaneous positive and negative deviants are intimately linked with moral passage and that they occupy a larger deviant role in society.

SETTING AND METHODS

I collected data for this article during a five-year ethnographic study of professional tattooing and tattoo collection. Falling within the opportunistic research tradition (Riemer 1977), I began studying the elite world of tattooing while dating Lefty Blue—a tattoo artist, elite collector, and owner of a tattoo shop located in a college town in the western United States. I first entered Lefty's shop, the Blue Mosque, while accompanying a friend to her tattoo appointment. Up until that point, I had associated tattooing with aggressive, outlaw characters, and dirty, smoke-filled "parlors." The individuals at the Blue Mosque presented an intriguing and attractive contradiction. While wearing outrageous attire including large, bright tattoos and multiple body piercings, Blue Mosque tattooists and shop regulars achieved a down-home brand of conventionality in their warm interactions with one another and with me. Further contrasting my image of tattooing, tattooists and clients were foremost interested in fine art. Conversations between tattooists and collectors at the Blue Mosque ran the gamut from recent art trends, including discussions about the latest fine art exhibits and critiques of up and coming fine artists' work, to the importance of such traditional American tattoo iconography as hearts and daggers, anchors, and skulls and cross bones.

While hanging out at the Blue Mosque to visit Lefty, I met several tattoo collectors and shop regulars. I also met artists who visited and worked at the Blue Mosque while "on tour" across the country. As Lefty's girlfriend, I was not only allowed to hang out at the shop after hours and sit in on tattoo sessions, I was also included in the after-hours events—such as parties, barbecues, dinners in town, and forays to local bars and clubs. My interest and involvement in the local tattoo scene became academic when Lefty invited me to use the Blue Mosque and his social world as my research setting for a graduate ethnographic methods class that I was taking.

Because everyone in the setting had met me in the context of my relationship with Lefty, my research role became "the girlfriend," a position that allowed me peripheral membership (Adler and Adler 1987) in this world and offered me thousands of opportunities to witness conversations between collectors and artists.

After completing my ethnography class, my relationship with Lefty and research grew. I had turned my tattoo research into the topic of my dissertation and, after two years of dating, Lefty and I were married. As Lefty's wife, I accompanied him and other tattooists and collectors when they attended tattoo conventions, visited tattoo shops, and received tattoos in such cities as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Honolulu, Denver, New Orleans, Chicago, New York, Richmond, Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, and Florence. When visiting locations in which Lefty and our friends knew tattooists, we were hosted to dinners, tours, and nights out on the town. By the fifth year of the study, Lefty and I had visited approximately 200 shops in the U.S. and Europe.

As a tattooist's wife, I gained a unique view and access to this social world. Like Sanders (1989), who forged a role as shop regular, I had constant contact with a group of collectors and artists while in tattoo shops. As Lefty's wife and a friend to many collectors and artists, I also watched elite collectors and artists interact in everyday conventional realms. While going out to dinner, shopping, or walking down the street with tattoo collectors and artists in U.S. and European cities, I noticed that Lefty and our friends received very different attention than I received when I was alone. I was anonymous in most crowds. When I was with elite collectors, however, we were approached, praised, insulted, or worshiped by various conventional looking individuals. I soon became interested in understanding why my husband and our friends received such mixed responses from conventional looking individuals.

I documented all my interactions by taking copious field notes after I returned home from visits with tattooists and collectors. While on the road, I kept a travel diary and used my time in airports, hotel rooms, and train stations to update my observations. I augmented my observations and notes by conducting 34 in-depth interviews, lasting between one and three hours, with collectors. A little less than half of

these interviews were with tattooists who were also collectors. During these interviews, I asked about how individuals first began collecting tattoos, their changing tastes, interactions with artists, adventures traveling, and desires for future art. Interested in the varying responses given to artists and collectors as they interacted in everyday life, I conducted interviews with individuals outside of the elite tattoo subculture. During interviews with 15 individuals with one or two small tattoos, I asked about their perceptions of heavily tattooed individuals and their aesthetic tattoo tastes. During interviews with 10 tattooless adults, I asked individuals to explain their feelings about tattoos and what they liked or disliked about tattooed individuals.

As my analysis progressed, I focused my observations and interviews on the dimensions of each emerging concept, including the reactions individuals received to their tattoos and individuals' tattoo preferences. This method of mixing analysis and data collection closely resembled the constant comparative and theoretical sampling procedures articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

ELITE DEVIANTS

According to Simon (2002), "elite deviants" are members of the U.S. power elite (Mills 1956) who break legal, moral, and ethical codes. As elite deviants they occupy a dual status. They enjoy tremendous wealth, power, and prestige at the same time that they author reprehensible acts that conflict with the moral code of most Americans. Members of the elite tattooing world also embody ideological conflicts. As deviants, they are concerned with maintaining a space for themselves on the margins of society by breaking many conventional norms. However, they are also elites who occupy a privileged position within tattooing circles.

The concept of elite deviance captures an inherent contradiction. Although primarily used to reflect upon the behaviors of influential political and corporate leaders, the concept can be used to examine how norm breaking and elitism are related in many instances, including examples of individuals who are deviant and want to be elites. Furthermore, the concept demonstrates how individuals can simultaneously combine the most revered and the most

reprehensible traits, norms, and values. By combining the most respected and the most feared, the concept of elite deviance points to the larger relationship between negative and positive deviance.

NEGATIVE DEVIANCE

The concept of negative deviance is the most longstanding classification of norm breaking and, to some, represents the vast bulk of what can be considered deviance (cf. Best and Luckenbill 1982; Goode 1991; Sagarin 1985). As Dodge (1985) noted, deviance historically has been understood as departures from social expectations. Those supporting the normal curve perspective (Wilkins 1964) suggested a particular orientation of departures from expectations. Deviants are those who fall below acceptable standards and who occupy the opposite end of the spectrum from saints and heroes. However, to proponents of the social reaction approach (Becker 1963), norm breaking is determined by the negotiated definitions and responses of others (i.e., negative responses).

Members of the tattoo elite are not only negative deviants just because many mainstream individuals treat them poorly, but also because they depart from and conflict with core standards within conventional society (cf. Ben-Yehuda 1990). Many of the sour looks, harsh stares, and informal punishments given to the heavily tattooed come because these individuals embrace norms and values that contrast sharply with conventional appearance norms. In addition, elite tattooees and artists deliberately increase their connection with others considered low class, outrageous, and disgusting to conventional individuals. Therefore, many of the behaviors of elite collectors and artists ruffle the feathers of mainstream individuals not only because individuals fall "below" statistical norms, but because elite collectors and artists embrace a set of values and norms that are significantly different and distant from the center of conventional life (cf. Shils 1975).

Appearance Violations

Collectors and producers of large, visible tattoos violate many core mainstream appearance norms. Within

conventional American society, light, clear skin is a long enduring beauty ideal. Dark skin is a metaphor for evil (Harris 1995; Stanfield 1997). In addition, blotchy, blemished, and marked skin in American society is seen as unhealthy, impure, ugly, or low class. In fact, light skin is highly correlated with psychological (Hall 1996a), occupational and educational (Hall 1996b; Hunter 1998), and economic (Seltzer and Smith 1991; Telles and Murguia 1990) advantage. Wearing large multicolored or black and gray designs across their arms, legs, chests, necks, hands, and, occasionally, across their faces, the heavily tattooed depart dramatically from light-skin appearance norms. Among elite tattoo collectors and artists, patches of plain skin serve as aberrations and reminders of the unfinished, unbalanced nature of their body suits. Light, pale, and colorless skin is only valued for its potential to hold future art. Tattoo collectors and artists are proud of their tattoos and willing to show their most recent or "best" pieces. While collectors proudly display finished pieces, half-finished tattoos and patches of bare skin are shielded from public view and considered embarrassments that call for apologies and explanations from their wearers. I wrote the following field note after an evening of hot tubbing with my husband and other tattoo collectors:

The prospect of soaking among friends evokes considerable body consciousness among this crowd. Instead of worrying about fat or physical fitness, members of this crowd are concerned about the state of their collections. Tonight, Mike commented about how much "I can't wait to get my arm completed." When I asked what it was like to have only half of his arm finished, he said, "it is awful and embarrassing. I don't even want to show it 'til it is done." Lefty, whose left leg is half tattooed and half bare, said, "I can't wait to finish this leg. I just look at it and think how great it will look when it is all tattooed. Now, it seems like something is missing. It seems plain in comparison to my other leg, which is almost done."

Like preferences for fine art, classical music, and poetry, or what Bourdieu (1980, 1984) called "legitimate culture," aesthetic appearance tastes are reinforced through informal and formal social networks. Early in their collecting careers,

individuals are often leery of covering "too much skin." In fact, after receiving their first few large tattoos, many collectors admit experiencing occasional moments of shock and second thoughts about the size of their tattoos. However, after circulating in the elite world for some time, many find themselves devaluing bare skin. Lorna, a collector and tattooist, describes her changing tattoo tastes.

I remember the first few large pieces I got on my leg. It took me a while to settle into them once I had them. I would sit down on the toilet and look down and go "Oh my god, I've got these tattoos on my legs." Later on, after two or three large pieces, I started viewing it as an overall look I was aiming for, this body suit. Then bare skin looked really strange to me.

Consistent with assumptions of social learning theory (Akers 1985, 1998; Burgess and Akers 1966; Sutherland 1947), appearance norms are reinforced through interactions with other collectors and artists (cf. Vail 1999b). Dropping pants, lifting shirts, or removing articles of clothing to show work are common interaction rituals among the heavily tattooed. They also serve as moments when a love of large work and a disdain for small tattoos are supported, a process that Burgess and Akers (1966) called positive and negative reinforcement.

While large tattoos are rewarded in collecting worlds, heavily tattooed individuals find themselves denounced, shunned, and insulted when interacting in mainstream circles. Many negative reactions emerge from elite collectors and artists' violation of mainstream appearance norms. Entrenched in a love of plain skin, conventional individuals see large tattoos as "covering up too much body" or as bold, gaudy, or tacky statements. Even those conventional individuals who admit liking small tattoos remark that large tattoos are an abomination. Frank, a 72-year-old father of four, discusses his aesthetic tattoo preferences: "Some of these little tattoos on the shoulders, I find artistic. Some of them look good. If it covers up too much body, it becomes counterproductive. I'm seeing more and more people with big tattoos, big tattoos on whole arms. I think that is ugly."

Individuals who violate plain-skin appearance norms are seen as shady, crazy, or monstrous characters. Such views of those who violate appearance norms means that elite collectors and tattooists endure much disregard from others in their everyday life. Some equate sentiments against the heavily tattooed with ethnic or racial prejudice. Betty, a collector in the process of removing her chin tattoo, describes reactions she receives.

I get sick of the attention. I want to walk down the street anonymously now and then. The most annoying comment is "are you growing a beard?" The most irritating thing is that people don't know that they are insulting you. It's like walking up to somebody who is Jewish and going "Hey, kike, how's it going?"

Such reactions are not only irritating and hurtful, they also carry serious economic and status consequences for collectors and artists. Doug, a collector, describes some of the disapproving reactions he receives.

Oh it is terrible. Terrible. I have lots of visible tattoos on my neck and on my hands. I get looked down upon quite extensively in everyday life. I got followed while I was shopping in the grocery store tonight. The security guard must have thought that I was going to shoplift something.

Stories about adverse treatment abound in this social world. Several collectors and tattooists tell me that, while traveling, they are often stopped and searched by airport security and receive poor service in restaurants and hotels. In addition, I have witnessed numerous incidents where parents have had to stop their children from staring at my husband or have steered their children away from our path. While taking our honeymoon vacation in Venice, Italy, Lefty and I became speechless when a street artist spat at him. Though accustomed to people staring, pointing, or laughing, such overt hostility unnerves us.

Attesting to the relative nature of appearance norms, negative reactions vary according to many factors, including individuals' ability and willingness to cover their tattoos with clothing, social context, and gender. Many wear long-sleeved shirts and pants before interacting in conventional circles. However, those who have tattooed "public skin"

such as faces, hands, and necks, find themselves unable to escape disdain and disregard. Collectors and artists also describe social contexts in terms of being "tattoo friendly" or "tattoo unfriendly." Locations such as university towns, large urban centers, or meccas for alternative lifestyles (hippie towns, gay resorts, nude beaches) are generally thought of as friendly locations. Communities and social contexts where traditional American values are embraced—especially rural, homogenous communities—are seen as risky areas of the country to visit. However, variations in reactions still exist even within "friendly" and "unfriendly" zones. Members of my study can find themselves subject to unusual kindness in isolated, rural communities or victims of harsh treatment in a Manhattan bar.

Women find themselves the recipients of a different brand of ill treatment than men. Wearing many large tattoos is an extreme violation of conventional female beauty norms. For breaking these norms, female collectors and artists are sometimes accused of being "masculine," "ugly," or "slutty." Jessica, a tattoo collector, describes some of the more annoying reactions she receives: "It's really interesting when people have negative things to say. They're like, 'why the hell would you do anything like that?' I've had people come up to me in grocery stores and shake their head in disgust and they're like, 'you could be such a pretty girl.'"

Celebrating Deviant Identities

Collectors and artists suggest that the popularization of tattoos threatens its fringe status. Because members of elite tattooing circles describe their tattoo pursuits as a reflection of their deep, lifelong commitment to rejecting normal society, the prospect of fitting in with a fleeting fad is troublesome. Many look forward to the time when tattoos will go out of fashion. Paul, a tattooist, describes the popularity of tattooing as embarrassing: "It kinda makes me embarrassed to tell people that I'm a tattooer. They are like, 'I saw a tattoo in a Calvin Klein ad and I know exactly what you're talking about.' Well no, you don't. You have no idea what I'm talking about. But that's what people see."

To differentiate their serious pursuits from fashion, elite collectors and artists distance themselves from trendy and hip social worlds as much as possible. Individuals manage

this differentiation in a variety of ways. One method includes maintaining allegiances with undesirable and marginal social groups inside and outside of the tattoo world. Stories of collectors and tattooists who worked as circus side show performers (cf. St. Clair and Govenar 1981) proliferate as a set of lore within this subculture. Where many collectors and tattooists make disparaging remarks about tattooed sorority and fraternity members, they give high praise to heavily tattooed bikers, convicts, and sex workers. When I ask whether tattooing would ever lose its association with bikers and convicts, Tristan, an artist, replies; "I hope not. That is the history of tattooing. I hope it will be the future too. That is what keeps it edgy. I hope it will always be associated with the underworld. Right now it is so at risk for becoming socially acceptable. I don't like that and it is not what I want to see in the future."

In addition to embracing fringe social groups, many elite collectors and tattooists foster tastes for macabre and bizarre objects. Such products as fetish magazines, medical books depicting congenital abnormalities, and fringe films and art are highly coveted by members of the elite world of tattooing. While attending a tattoo convention in Paris, my husband and I were advised about the best art to see in the city. The Fragonard Museum—with its collection of preserved humans, horses, and babies—and a show titled "The Art of the Dead"—depicting art made from skulls and bones—received high recommendations from many convention goers. In fact, unusual and offbeat items are so highly valued that collectors sometimes use bizarre memorabilia as payment for tattoos. Gretchen, a girlfriend of a tattooist, tells a story about one such incident.

I know that everyone in that shop is not in it for the money because I have seen the things that they do and I've seen how little they charge. I've seen what they will trade for tattoos, like puppies in jars. My boyfriend traded puppies in jars. They were Doberman puppies, they were stillborn, and someone traded them for a tattoo. He has one of them at the shop and he gave another one of them away as a present. I hear it was well received.

Aesthetically, elite collectors and tattooists prefer tattoos depicting fringe themes. Images of monsters, demons,

beheadings, severed hands, and aliens are popular tattoo images among this crowd. One of Lefty's favorite tattoos is an image of a four-armed fairy disemboweling a caterpillar. Tattooists asked to draw and tattoo such images are inspired to do their best work. In addition to selecting fringe themes for their tattoos, a number of tattooists give themselves "stage" names that position them outside of the mainstream. One tattooist (and good friend) uses a synonym for filth as his tattooing name. Another named himself after a sex toy. Lefty particularly likes the salty "old sailor" sound of his chosen name.

In many ways, collectors and artists' efforts to forge an alliance with outcast groups and fringe subjects do achieve their objective. For example, no matter how popular having one or two small tattoos becomes, many people continue to see the heavily tattooed as freaks and spectacles. Kelly, a tattoo collector, discusses her experiences while taking a bus with friends.

One day me and my friends were on the bus and this woman was staring at us. Not the usual side stare or the "I'm pretending to look past you when I'm really staring at you" look. She was bold-faced staring right at us. Eventually she talked to us and asked the usual questions like "Did it hurt?" and "How long did that take?" Before we got off the bus she said "Why did you do that? Are you in the circus?" We all laughed and said "Yeah, we are in the circus."

While collectors and artists revere and emulate some fringe social groups, they are not happy to find themselves stereotyped or associated with hate groups or violence. Francis, a tattooist and collector, describes his experiences.

When I go to someplace and I feel that people are hostile, I just try to stay calm and explain to 'em that I am not some redneck jerk that doesn't care. I have to kind of convince people that I'm not this stereotype. That's the part that I hate. Every time you hear somebody say something that's derogatory about what you're doing, you step up and let 'em know that tattooists are not one group of people. They're just as varied as, like, say lawyers or sociologists. And there's

probably the same percentage of bad as there are in any other field. If every lawyer was judged by the shitty ambulance chaser, they would get no respect.

POSITIVE DEVIANCE

The concept of positive deviance remains a controversial one and is defined by some as those who exceed or overconform to social norms (Dodge 1985; Heckert 1989, 1997, 1998; Hughes and Coakley 1991; Huryn 1986). Elite collectors and tattooists are also overconformers. While forging spaces for themselves on society's periphery (Shils 1975), collectors and artists adhere to some core mainstream symbols and behaviors more than most conventional individuals. Specifically, collectors and artists construct themselves as high culture icons and popular celebrities and, in this way, elevate themselves above normal society. Much of the praise, adulation, and esteem bestowed upon them stems from their use of highly valued conventional traits.

High Culture Icons

The category of *high culture icon* derives from elite collectors' and tattooists' association with symbols of high culture and personification of high cultural ideals. In general, high culture is thought of as the products supported and commissioned by elite social classes and includes such works of art as operas, ballets, paintings and sculpture, poetry, classical music, and stage plays (see High Culture Orientation Scale in Ryan and DeBord 1991). Historically, objects defined as fine art, music, literature, and theater garner much prestige and status in society. While art results from a process of social construction (Becker 1974, 1982), defining objects as art has status consequences for artistic consumers and producers. Artifacts of high culture, and the artists who produce them, are thought to reflect the best and most noble aspects of a particular society. The skill, technical training, and genius involved in the production of such work elevate the product and the producers above the commonplace and bring them closer to ideals of beauty and intellectual enlightenment. Those connected to these artistic

endeavors, either as artists or collectors, are defined as exceptional characters.⁴

Noting the qualities that contribute to defining objects as art, Sanders (1989) argued that tattooing—in the 1970s and 1980s—existed on the brink of fine art status.⁵ Members of the tattoo elite in this study bring many fine art norms and values to tattooing and try to increase the association between tattooing and aspects of high culture. The association of fine art with tattooing came when numerous fine artists left fine art professions to enter the booming tattoo market in the 1990s. Trisha, a tattooist, describes a common sentiment among fine art trained tattooists.

I found more and more people with tattoos. I noticed that none of them were very good. People were covering a lot of their skin with things that just weren't all that great. It just looked like the people doing the tattoos didn't have an understanding of what they were drawing or of the subject. I thought I can draw better than that. I was like yeah, this might be a

⁴In a quote from a popular art textbook, Hartt (1976:14) alludes to the social- and self-betterment that are thought to circulate around art objects:

That the purpose of art is to be enjoyed means, of course, that the experience of works of art can greatly enrich our lives, not only while we are actually looking at them but also in retrospect. The comparison of works of art with each other, and the analysis of their style and character, can be a rewarding intellectual occupation, from which we emerge with sharpened perceptions and enlarged mental horizons. The experience of the vision of artists from many periods can also draw our attention to aspects of our surroundings that we had previously overlooked, and can greatly enhance our awareness of beauty (and ugliness) in daily life, everywhere.

⁵A number of changes in fine art and tattoo worlds have helped tattoos become constructed as high culture products in the 1990s and 2000s. Noting the increasing connection between tattoos and art in the 1970s and 1980s, Sanders (1989) suggested that many forces could help or hinder the inclusion of tattoos into the category of high art. While numerous tattoo art shows and art publications on the subject of tattoos during the 1970s and 1980s helped frame tattoos as art objects, Sanders noted that several factors—such as the limited collectibility of tattoos (i.e., tattoos could only be purchased by the wearer rather than purchased and sold several times) and the unconventional production mode of tattoos (injection of pigments into the skin)—made the future of tattoos as art uncertain. Since the publication of Sanders' work, many photographers, painters, and multimedia artists have begun to use the subject of tattoos in their art (Blackwell 1989; Dery 1995; Lam 1996; Tyler 1987) and have helped merge tattoos with conventional modes of artistic production and collection. At the same time that individuals within tattoo and art worlds were helping to elevate the definition of tattoos from craft to art, this study suggests that lay individuals often recognized elite collectors' tattoos as examples of fine art.

good thing to look into because if people will wear *that* [low-quality tattoos], they'd more than likely wear something that is really interesting [i.e., higher-quality tattoos].

After entering tattooing, many artists remain connected with fine art circles. Tattooists maintain friendships with fine artists struggling for recognition, attend gallery shows, and keep up with the trends in fine art worlds. Some are able to secure gallery showings of their work. Given their close connection with fine art worlds, tattooists introduce many aspects of the fine art professions into tattooing. Rubin (1988) argued that it is this migration that influenced a "tattoo renaissance" in the 1960s and 1970s that included a new set of artistic conventions in the world of tattooing. While the influence of fine art, and especially Japanese art, in tattooing was recognized in the work of a few American tattooists working in the 1960s, by the 1990s and 2000s fine art influences were well entrenched in the tattoo world.

Fine art trained and influenced tattooists rely on fine art aesthetic conventions in their tattoo work. Tattooists suggest that such techniques have become an essential part of tattooing. Lefty discusses his views on these conventions.

In order to be a successful executor of what the client demands, you need to know the basics. Practicing the modeling of objects, the use of light and shade, using foreshortening as a means of perspective. Composition is up there first and foremost. You are dealing with how images fit on the body. You want to make sure that the light sources are believable and the image will be readable. This is the basics of much of what gets viewed as art. But if you want to be a good tattooist, you have to push yourself as an artist. You need to practice these things.

In addition to aesthetic conventions, tattooists also bring organizational features from the fine art world to tattooing. Intellectual discussions about "good and bad" tattoo work as well as the use of "critique" abound within the tattoo community. Many believe that opening their work to peer review, and especially to the critique of those considered "masters," will help them achieve their artistic goals. I wrote the following field note after witnessing a conversation between artists about the function of artistic critiques.

The four tattooists told humorous stories about other tattooists. One story was about a mutual friend and tattooist, Ronald, who hounded Bane—a well-respected tattooist—to look at his tattoo portfolio and offer a constructive critique. Bane took a look at Ronald's book and heavily criticized it. According to the story, Ronald became extremely angry and would not talk to anyone for several days. Considering Ronald's response inappropriate, one of the artists said, "Bane critiqued my book one day. He just grabbed it and starting saying 'If you had put this here or that there don't you think it would look a lot better?' He was totally right and I didn't get mad." Another tattooist said, "I get inspired when someone critiques my work. It makes me want to go out and do better work."

While tattooists introduce fine art structures, norms, and values into tattooing and help increase the social connections between tattooing and fine art, elite collectors also make claims for the fine art status of elite tattooing. One method of establishing themselves within high art realms is for collectors to claim that they are collaborators in the fine art process. Many collectors imagine a division of labor between artist and collector: they, as collectors, craft the concepts, themes, and inspiration for the tattoo, while their tattooists execute the idea. Simone, for example, studies the background and technical abilities of her tattoo artists very carefully. As an amateur chef, she is interested in incorporating a food theme for one of her tattoos. She, thus, asks Gus to draw a cornucopia image for her not only because she admires his work, but because she feels that asking Gus, an abstract artist, to produce a literal image of fruits and vegetables will result in an interesting tattoo. Simone feels that by challenging Gus to produce an image that he might not have otherwise attempted, she is instrumental in creating the final product, a tattoo that appears in many tattoo magazines and is considered one, among many, of Gus's important pieces.

However, most collectors do not suggest that they are fine artists. Instead, most construct themselves as well-educated artistic consumers. Indeed, the term "tattoo collector" stems from tattoo clients' presentations of themselves as being likened to fine art collectors. Similar to Vail's (1999a) tattoo collectors, individuals in this study use their knowledge of tattoo art to claim an "aesthethician" status. Ron, a collector,

feels that he has not reached the highest status of elite tattoo collection. However, he has accumulated enough knowledge to argue that he is above most tattoo clients. He comments:

There are different scales of what people know. At the low end there are the tweety-bird people who wander around idolizing nobodies and who are not going to appreciate anything worthwhile. Then you have people who appreciate tattoos, but may not have a lot of good ones. Then you have people who try to have good tattoos but who are peripherally involved. I feel like I am at the next level. We understand what a good tattoo is and we understand that in order to get a really good tattoo, you may have to travel somewhere. Although I haven't had to travel yet, I know what is going on. I know that there are these different schools. There is just a basic knowledge.

Some collectors become almost as famous as their artists for their "outstanding collections." Lorna discusses her assortment of tattoos: "I'm very aware of the fact that I have a better collection of tattoos than most women, and maybe most men. I have this kind of world-class collection. I'm very conscious of what's on my body, regardless of the actual body, is really beautiful and people admire it." Lorna's tattoos not only are featured in the portfolios of well-known artists, but are published in numerous magazines. Noting Lorna's fame, one artist jokes that "Lorna's thighs are known from coast to coast."⁶

Outside of the tattoo world, collectors continue to receive positive attention from others. While the names or styles of the tattooists' work rarely come up in conversation, individuals recognize particular tattoos as being "good" examples of art. Jessica discusses the positive attention she receives.

I'm really proud to be able to get good work, to show people good work, and to say "See, this is what a tattoo can be." I've had people say, "My god, your tattoo is so beautiful" and "I've never seen a tattoo so nice before." It is exciting for me

⁶As this quote suggests, the fame of collecting proved to be a precarious occupation for women in the subculture. Women often started to collect tattoo art as a way of creating a sense of self outside of traditional female beauty norms. However, norms within the tattoo subculture mirrored the norms outside the subculture, and women found themselves confronted with the same expectations, stereotypes, and sexually explicit comments inside the subculture as they faced in conventional life.

to say, "If you like this, there are so many other people in this world who have incredible work too." I'm really excited when people look at my stuff and love it.

In many ways, the appreciation of "well done work" comes from a cultural appreciation for classical and Renaissance art techniques. While most lay people nowadays can rarely name *contemporary* fine artists, Renaissance artists names such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Leonardo Da Vinci instantly evoke notions of "artistic genius." Likewise, the techniques used by such Renaissance and classical painters, as well as many Japanese artists, also become synonymous with "great art." Once tattooists began experimenting with these methods in tattooing (Rubin 1988), tattoos were more often viewed positively as great examples of art.

Popular Celebrities

Aside from their connection with fine art worlds, elite collectors and tattooists also approximate popular culture celebrities. Many actors, athletes, and rock stars are thought to be magnificent and spectacular not because they have considerable high cultural knowledge and talent, but because they represent the idea that any person with any level of education and from any class can be recognized for their uniqueness. Celebrities are the darlings of all classes and establish a more democratic, albeit capitalist and consumer based, example of core social norms and values. As Braudy (1986) argued, fame in the 20th century reflects the ideal of meritocracy in that any person who has that elusive star quality can be recognized as superior.⁷ Popular celebrities

⁷Celebrities are not only deviants because they rise above normal society, but also because their exceptional status allows them to break norms more than "normal" people. In some cases, such as rock stars, celebrities are worshiped because they break social rules. As Weinstein (1995:190) argued, "Rock stars are licensed/expected by their fans to go to hedonic excess, to be extravagant, and to be careless of sanity, safety, and even survival." While working on a smaller scale than Hollywood-star manufacturers, the tattoo celebrity machinery helped turn collectors and artists into mini-gods within the tattoo world. Articles in tattoo magazines, word of mouth, and tours through the United States, Europe, Japan, and Australia helped build elite collectors' and especially artists' bigger-than-life reputations within this social world. In addition, in the same way that rock stars are encouraged to become examples of hedonism, elite collectors sometimes became highly celebrated symbols of excess, extravagance, and norm breaking.

are beyond normal society, but not for the same reasons that fine artists, composers, writers, poets, and classical musicians are thought to be superior to the mundane. Their claims to greatness are based on values and trends within the culture of the masses.

In many ways, elite members of the tattoo world are ensnared in celebrity and garner some of the praise, worship, and positive evaluation bestowed upon mega-stars. Francis talks about the nature of tattooists' celebrity status.

Being this guy that no one knows about, having this job that people are so interested in, but are still kind of a little bit freaked out by it. Like that tension makes people have this real strange reaction to it. And when you get good, you can control it. Your name becomes as important as the work you do. And so then your name has this other life. It's close to having a normal job, but still having this rock star image.

In fact, collectors and artists enjoy much positive evaluation because they approximate flashy and glamorous personas. European travel serves as one alluring feature of the collecting lifestyle. Because many well-known tattooists work in Europe and Japan, elite collectors make frequent ventures overseas to complete their "body suits." In addition, tattooists often incorporate annual European tours into their schedules. Inviting particular American tattooists to work "guest spots," the owners of tattoo shops in Paris, Barcelona, Amsterdam, and Berlin advertise the expected visits of these famous American tattooists months before their arrivals. Such hype creates a small hysteria surrounding particular tattooists. While attending a tattoo convention in Paris (called "The All Star Tattoo Convention"), I witnessed the frenzy of tattoo fame as a barrage of people lined up to have their convention posters signed by one well-known artist.

While tattoo stardom tends to occur most often among tattoo artists, some collectors earn a share of tattoo celebrity. Some tattoo magazines, usually of the variety that DeMello (2000) called "biker magazines," include articles about tattoo collectors alongside their features of tattoo artists. Increasing the chance for collectors, especially female collectors, to accrue celebrity status, most tattoo magazines in the 1990s and early 2000s feature tattoo "cover girls,"

tattooed women who pose provocatively on the cover of magazines. On several occasions, while visiting tattoo conventions or traveling to tattoo shops, I come across tattoo cover girls. Like sightings of film and television celebrities (Ferris 2001), encounters with cover girls produce some excitement within the tattoo world. I wrote the following field note after spending a day at the 1997 San Francisco Tattoo Tour convention.

Mike and I spent most of the day roaming the aisles and looking at artists' portfolios. As we pushed our way through the hordes of people, Mike spotted Lila, a woman who has appeared on several tattoo covers. Although Mike has only seen Lila in magazines, he has developed an enormous crush on her. The excitement of seeing her in person was intoxicating. My heart skipped a beat or two. We circled around the booth where she was standing to take a closer look at her. Ultimately, neither of us had the courage to talk with her and finally left the area in a giddy mood.

In addition to approximating stardom, collectors and artists sometimes find themselves circulating within celebrity social networks. The popularity of tattoos with models, athletes, actors, and rock stars bring celebrities to tattoo shops around the country. Like many clients, some celebrities forge friendships with their artists and other shop regulars. This is especially true for members of the rock n' roll scene who, more than most stars, embrace tattoo collection and tattooists. Collectors, especially tattooists, find themselves privy to free tickets to concerts, back stage passes, or invitations to private parties. As the wife of a respected tattooist, I benefit from the celebrity perks afforded to elite members of the tattoo world. During my fieldwork, I met one famous athlete while he waited to receive a tattoo, sat in on a tattoo given to a well-known actress, and went backstage several times to hang out with famous bands whose members had been tattooed by mutual friends.

Whether because of their flashy personas or their social connections with famous individuals, tattooists and some collectors are treated as celebrities themselves. While going out to dinner or visiting clubs and bars in town, tattoo artists and regular clients of the Blue Mosque receive VIP treatment.

It is unusual for us to visit a bar without securing free drinks or venture out to eat without acquiring a complementary appetizer or dessert. I wrote the following field note after a night out with a group of Blue Mosque tattooists and collectors.

We arrived at the sushi restaurant in a large crowd. Although we had no reservations and there were many large groups waiting to be seated, we were escorted to a premier table in the back of the restaurant immediately upon our arrival. As we walked through the restaurant, all heads turned towards us. It was extremely hot today, so everyone wore shorts and tank tops. Thus, members of our group were prominently displaying their tattoo collections. As individuals wrenched their heads to look our way, I noticed two familiar looking men seated in the middle of the restaurant. As it turned out they were members of one of the most popular rock bands this year and were to play at a local concert hall later tonight. They also stared at us. The wait staff brought us several complementary bottles of sake and special dishes prepared for us by the sushi chefs. Ironically, throughout our meal, individuals in the restaurant continued to stare at us while completely ignoring the two rock stars seated among them.

DISCUSSION

Their dramatic departure from appearance norms and affinity for outcast groups, themes, and activities help construct elite collectors and artists as deviants within the negative tradition of the concept. Much of the derision they receive stems from the many ways that they conflict with conventional norms and values. However, collectors and artists receive much praise for their difference from the norm. Like those who exceed social norms (Ewald and Jiobu 1985; Heckert 1989; Hughes and Coakley 1991; Huryn 1986), elite collectors and artists are, in many ways, above average for their use of high culture symbols and connection with celebrity statuses. Much of the adoration they receive in both conventional and deviant settings comes from the fact that they evoke and adhere to highly prized values in mainstream society.

By combining extreme examples of overconformity and underconformity, members of the tattoo elite occupy a varied status in society. This conflicting status offers several insights

for understanding deviance, not the least of which are insights regarding the categories of positive deviance. In her classificatory model of six types of positive deviance, Heckert (1998) acknowledged that "other types of positive deviance could also be postulated at some future point" (p. 25). Indeed, the types of positive attention bestowed upon collectors and artists points to two new types of positive deviants: "high culture icons" and "popular celebrities."

The category of high culture icon refers to the ways that elite collectors and tattooists attempt to align themselves with fine art worlds, including the norms, values, products, and structure of the fine art industry. Tattooists' fine art training and knowledge allow them an easy claim to a fine art status. Because they do not produce tattoos themselves, collectors have a weaker claim to fine artist statuses. However, collectors sometimes note that they author the conceptual component of tattoo artistry and, more frequently, suggest that they are like knowledgeable fine art collectors.

By using their association with fine art, elite collectors and tattooists draw upon larger social class divisions within society. As Bourdieu (1980:253) argued, legitimate cultural taste, or the appreciation of high culture artifacts, "unites and separates" individuals and announces their social location, specifically their class location. In this way, elite collectors and tattooists are demonstrating their cultural capital and using it to construct themselves as superior to those with less cultural capital. In addition, they are relying on devices that demarcate larger social class distinctions to establish boundaries between themselves and others.

The category of popular celebrities points to alternative ways that collectors and tattooists identify themselves as elites. At the same time that elite collectors and tattooists flaunt their fine art knowledge, tastes, and talents, they also work to become the darlings of the masses. They behave like film, sports, and rock stars by signing autographs, posing for magazines, and living glamorous, flashy lifestyles. As Gamson (1992, 1994) argued, the media helps construct celebrities as individuals worthy of praise. Elite collectors and tattooists also have the tattoo media on their side to prove that they are worthy of special attention.

These two new categories of positive deviance are similar. They represent ways that society bestows an elite status upon

individuals who possess rare and highly valued talents and are connected to "superior" social worlds. However, they are separate in that the values, norms, social worlds, institutions, industries, and types of talents involved in high culture icon and popular celebrity statuses are different. High culture icons are talented in upper-class art forms, including operas, ballets, paintings and sculpture, poetry, classical music, and stage plays. High culture icons are also connected to particular institutions and organizations, including art galleries, museums, symphonies, and opera and ballet companies. Popular celebrities are talented in the activities of lay individuals, including sports (baseball, basketball, football), music (punk rock, heavy metal, pop, rap), and theater (movies, television). Such institutions and organizations as newspapers, magazines, television stations, and record companies help secure individuals' celebrity statuses.

By drawing their superior status from both high and lay culture, elite collectors and tattooists borrow features of a larger, overarching network in society, that of the "power elite" (Mills 1956). As Simon (2002) claimed, the high culture industries and mass media enterprises are linked at the highest levels. Elite collectors and tattooists do not claim that they are political and corporate leaders; however, they borrow symbols and identity construction maneuvers (i.e., using high and lay cultural capital) from the realm of the power elite to claim superior and special statuses for themselves on the margins of society. Therefore, their branch of elite deviance represents a reverse phenomenon described by Simon (2002). They are deviants and outcasts who use conventional methods to maintain privilege (i.e., they are deviants who are elite), rather than powerful members of conventional society who use deviant methods to maintain privilege (i.e., they are elites who are deviant).

These data, especially the finding that members of the tattoo elite borrow aspects of their identity from power elites (as well as from powerless outcasts), suggest ways that normative and subjective theories of deviance might be combined. To date, these two deviance perspectives remain rigidly divided. Normative deviance theorists believe that deviance occurs when individuals break agreed-upon social rules. In this view, deviance is inherent in particular activities that are harmful, problematic, and destructive to society.

Subjectivists argue that deviance is not inherent in the act and, instead, is created through social definitions, informal and formal reactions, and labels. This view implies that almost any activity, if constructed in the correct way by powerful groups, can be considered deviant. These data demonstrate how both theories are correct, and, more specifically, they show how labels can stem from the inherent traits of particular activities. Individuals in this study receive negative attention when their behaviors contradict or conflict with middle-class and upper-class norms and values regarding appearance, language, demeanor, and taste. Conversely, they receive praise by conventional individuals when they exhibit traits highly valued in high culture (fine art knowledge and skill) and popular culture (flashiness, distinctiveness, glamour). Therefore, the reactions of others is not random, but is directly linked to the different qualities within elite collectors' and tattooists' behaviors.

This view implies that this normative and subjective dichotomy within deviance theory might not always be necessary and that, in fact, the two perspectives might be combined to lead to a promising direction for future deviance research and a more sophisticated understanding of deviance. The underlying assumption within a combined normative and subjective perspective is that deviance lies both within an activity and the way activities are defined. In the future, researchers using this approach might focus upon how particular traits inherently support or contradict norms and values of different groups, particularly groups in power. Such detailed understandings of these qualities within behaviors and conditions can be used to predict when definitions of situations, moral entrepreneurial campaigns (Becker 1963), moral crusades (Gusfield 1963), and claims making activities (Spector and Kitsuse 1977) are likely to succeed.⁸

⁸While labeling theorists have generally understood that such status characteristics as age, gender, and race determine what groups are most likely to be negatively labeled (cf. Paternoster and Iovanni 1989), such as view has not been extended to include behavioral characteristics such as language, demeanor, tastes, and dress (for exception, see Cicourel 1968). In addition, analyses of status characteristics have primarily been used to predict when individuals are most likely to receive formal sanctions within criminal justice agencies and have not been used to predict when individuals are likely to receive informal sanctions in their everyday lives.

Beyond offering new examples of positive deviance and pointing to ways that normative and subjective approaches to deviance might be merged, members of the tattoo elite deserve particular attention because they are simultaneous positive and negative deviants, a combination that has not been given much attention in the deviance literature. By putting together conflicting elements and taking values and norms from both fringe and mainstream society, jointly positive/negative deviants disrupt and confuse the lines drawn between groups. Traditionally, members of particular subcultures are disdained by outsiders while revered by members of their own group. According to the literature on small group dynamics, insiders tend to positively evaluate those who emulate their own values and norms and devalue those who are different (Harris 1995; Pettigrew 1979; Tajfel 1970). This dynamic works to increase the divide between deviant and conventional groups. Those who demonstrate their commitment to deviance are privileged within delinquent peer groups (Akers 1985, 1998; Burgess and Akers 1966; Sutherland 1947) but are treated harshly within straight society (Ageton and Elliott 1974; Becker 1963; Boshier and Johnson 1974; Schwartz and Skolnick 1962). Yet elite collectors and tattooists depart from this pattern. While they are positively evaluated by members of deviant and fringe social groups, they receive both praise and derision within conventional society.

This mixed conventional reception reflects a split within normative society between those sympathetic and those hostile to tattoos. Sympathetic members are composed of both the trendy, hip individuals who receive the small, flash tattoos and those nontattooed individuals who flirted with the idea of getting body art but were held back from this by the constraints of normative society. Hostile members are those whose conceptions of tattoos are tied to older social meanings of body art as dirty, dangerous, and lower class.

Elite collectors and tattooists' simultaneous positive/negative deviance can, in part, be attributed to the evolving social meaning of tattoos. Whenever moral passage is occurring with regard to definitions of deviance, there will be a labeling war, with parties divided in their sentiments. Those on one side will favor or advocate the behavior or conditions, while those on the other side will condemn it, often

vociferously. The positive/negative deviant status confluence is thus tied to moral passage (Gusfield 1967).

Elite collectors' and tattooists' simultaneous positive and negative deviant status not only serves as an outcome of social change, it also functions as a fixed property of the social order. As Erikson (1966) argued, definitions of deviance constantly shift. However, the presence of deviance remains a stable social force and a necessary condition to preserve social order. Collectors and tattooists in this study can be seen as a group occupying an important social location as elites on the boundaries between conventional and outcast social groups. In this way, they might be seen as occupying a larger role of "antihero," individuals who bring together the most revered and most hated symbols circulating in the mainstream. Antiheroes can be said to contribute to changing definitions of deviance, to evoke or confuse informal and formal social control mechanisms, and to dislodge or point to centers of power. As the definitions of deviance change, different groups will come to occupy the antihero status. However, this role will stay constant and will continue to reinforce and challenge boundaries between social groups and between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

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