ABSTRACT

TITLE:	Inscriptions of Connectivity: The Cultural Significance of Modern Tattoo
AUTHOR(S):	Studinski, James
PRESENTED AT:	4th Annual Natural & Behavioral Sciences Undergraduate Research Symposium, Fort Lewis College

ABSTRACT: The practice of tattooing has often been met with a reaction of certain stigma from the Western perspective. The objective of this study is to illustrate a redefinition of the meaning of tattoo in an early 21st century global society. The information presented seeks to challenge the perceptions of tattooing in Western culture as a deviant practice and lead the observer to an understanding of a normative ritual based in cultures on every continent (Rainier, 2004), which has remained relatively consistent over many thousands of years. The tattoo will be established as a medium of connection to our surrounding environment. Implications are discussed in the context of a modern world which is rapidly changing under the influences of socially intrusive factors based in capitalism and globalization. The study was implemented through an in-depth analysis of available literature, both historical and contemporary, accompanied by a qualitative survey study of individuals having tattoos. The survey, adapted from Littell (2003), was "designed to examine motivations for being tattooed and the meaning of tattoo imagery." It was posted on the online networking site Facebook.com, and made available to approximately 150 individuals over a period of three weeks. Participants completing the survey included nine women and three men, ages 18 to 45, all Caucasian, responding from the United States, United Kingdom, and Denmark. All participants had at least one tattoo. Themes of meaning and motivation behind tattoos were found to be multifaceted and in many cases overlapping. Three main categories became apparent: affirmation, which consisted of a proclamation of independence, assertion of control, or reclaiming of one's body; rite of passage, in which a tattoo is a representation of achievement, self-recognition, or epiphany; and connection, a symbolic link to another person, group of people, physical place, object, or time in one's life. The results of this research indicate that the tattoo today is serving much the same purpose as it has throughout history in an extensive range of cultural contexts. That is, connection to the world, physically, mentally, and spiritually; the seeking of a relationship with self and others; and the establishment of personal identity.