What Criminals’ Tattoos Symbolize: Drawing on Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso

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To cite this article: Scott Jacques (2017) What Criminals’ Tattoos Symbolize: Drawing on Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso, Deviant Behavior, 38:11, 1303-1317, DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2016.1197606

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2016.1197606

Published online: 31 Jan 2017.

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What Criminals’ Tattoos Symbolize: Drawing on Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso

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ABSTRACT
Criminals’ tattoos have many meanings. A limitation of prior research is that these meanings have not been organized into an elegant yet exhaustive typology that is theoretically informed. To address that gap, this article analyzes “Russian criminal tattoos” in light of classic conceptions of tattoos—namely those of Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso. The benefits of the analysis include (1) an expanded conception of what tattoos symbolize from Darwinian and Durkheimian perspectives and (2) the formation of a simple but comprehensive typology of what criminals’ tattoos represent. The article concludes by considering implications for future research.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 January 2016
Accepted 14 March 2016

Introduction

“Because of its common occurrence among criminals, tattooing has assumed a … significance that calls for close and careful study” (Lombroso [1885] 2006:58; see, e.g., Jennings, Fox, and Farrington 2014; Silver, VanEseltine, and Silver 2009). One such area of inquiry delves into what offenders’ tattoos symbolize. Ethnographic research shows that their tattoos have many meanings (see, e.g., DeMello 1993, 2000; Phelan and Hunt 1998; Phillips 1999). Yet a limitation of that work is that these meanings have not been organized into a theoretically informed typology that is simple and comprehensive.¹

This article advances the study of criminals’ tattoos by filling the above lacuna. Conceptual order is obtained by drawing on the work of Charles Darwin, Émile Durkheim, and Cesare Lombroso, all of whom made statements on what tattoos represent. When combined, their conceptions constitute a typology of what criminals’ tattoos symbolize.

After presenting that typology, the article turns to an analysis of several hundred prisoner tattoos collected over several decades by a correctional officer in Russia. The purpose of the analysis is to determine whether the ideas of Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso provide a practical and exhaustive basis for categorizing criminals’ tattoos. An added benefit of the analysis is that it leads to a theoretically coherent expansion of what tattoos symbolize from Darwinian and Durkheimian perspectives. The conclusion discusses implications for future research. Before going down that path, the article turns to a history of the connections between criminals and tattoos.

Criminals and tattoos

The link between criminals and tattoos is multiplexed. The earliest documented connection is that of governments punitively tattooing offenders. This practice dates back to antiquity; it may have begun in Persia, from there spreading to Greece and then onward to the Roman Empire (Jones 1987).

¹For the importance categorization in science, see, for example, Bailey (1994), Cooney and Phillips (2002), Homans (1967), and Yoon (2009).
Punitive tattooing has been used in other places, as well, such as Great Britain, France, Russia, the United States, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia (Hambly [1925] 2009; Hesselt van Dinter 2005; Hill 2003; Kaplan and Durbo 2003; Parry [1933] 2006). Indeed, punitive tattoos are, or at least were, a global phenomenon, as they served a number of functions: retribution was obtained by physically hurting and psychologically degrading the offender; deterrence resulted if persons refrained from offending to avoid this punishment; prevention was obtained by warning citizens to whom to avoid; and a criminal record was made that could be used to keep track of whether a person was a repeat offender and thus deserving of a more severe punishment (Hill 2003; Jones 1987).

At other times, governments have outlawed tattooing, which is a second link. Tattooing was widespread in Samoa and Tahiti until Christians took control of the government and effectively banned the tradition for more than a century (D’Alleva 2005; Kuwahara 2005; see also Ellis 2008). In Japan, tattooing came to be seen by the government as a “barbaric practice unbecoming a modern state” and therefore prohibited until the mid-twentieth century (Hill 2003:87; see also Hesselt van Dinter 2005; Kaplan and Durbo 2003; Parry [1933] 2006). It was also outlawed in the United States for some time, although the leading concern was for health, as medical professionals were blaming tattooing for the transmission of hepatitis and other diseases (Osterud 2009). Today in many countries, prisoners are not allowed to tattoo themselves or others (Phillips 1999), and face punishments such as “having equipment confiscated, having privileges removed, and being locked up in solitary” (DeMello 1993:12).

Governments have also used criminals’ chosen tattoos against them; this is a third link. Around the turn of the nineteenth century, for instance, a serial killer was captured after a survivor told the police of a “Born under a bad sign” tattoo on the murderer’s arm (Hesselt van Dinter 2005). Indeed, some of the earliest forensic criminal investigators and scholars, such as Lacassagne in France and Lombroso in Italy, were adamant that tattoos could and should be used to identify lawbreakers (Caplan 2006). That strategy continues today (FUEL 2014a; O’Deane 2008; Phelan and Hunt 1998; Savelli 2005; Valentine 1995, 2000). Police use criminals’ tattoos to discern who is likely to be a criminal and to “ID” those on the run; correctional officers use criminals’ tattoos to determine where to house them and which ones to be extra cautious around.

One reason tattoos are useful for law enforcement is that offenders often are tattooed. Going back at least to Lombroso, scholarship shows a strong correlation between offending and being tattooed; this is the fourth link. In his early study, The English Convict, Goring (1913) documents 43% of 487 sampled convicts as having tattoos. Based on his research, DeMello (1993) conjectures that more than half of male prisoners in the United States are tattooed. A survey done in the 1970s with members of yakuza—the famous Japanese gang—found that about 70% had tattoos (Hill 2003). Such strong correlations do not mean that tattoos cause crime, but rather that persons who are prone to tattooing may also be prone to crime (see especially Jennings et al. 2014).

**Meaning of criminals’ tattoos**

There is yet another factor that makes tattoos useful for formal control: namely, offenders’ tattoos often represent law-breaking. Before reviewing contemporary work on the topic, it is important to distinguish between the “specific” and “general” meaning of tattoos.

The specific meaning of a tattoo is strictly a matter of its content—the particular symbols it incorporates (e.g., a gun, shackles). This notion is reflected in Von Hentig’s (1948:107) statement that “[t]he decoration is ... nothing in itself; it is the content that counts.” The general meaning of tattoos encompasses what they broadly indicate about individuals above and beyond their specific meaning. This is touched on by Gambetta (2009:86), for instance, when he notes that “[m]any criminals ... mark themselves with tattoos. ... Regardless of their symbolism if very extensive, ... tattoos testify to a considerable resilience to pain.” In a similar vein, Atkinson (2003) defines the “Rebel Era” (c. 1950–1970) of tattooing as that in which “a full spectrum of social deviants”—including criminals—“adopted tattooing as a method of permanently expressing a politically charged
disaffection with the cultural surroundings\textsuperscript{a} (p. 38). Note that in these latter two statements, nothing is said of any given tattoo’s specific meaning; rather, the impetus is on what they generally symbolize.

This article’s analysis will focus on the specific meaning of criminals’ tattoos. Perhaps the most widely known example of such is the gang tattoo. Valentine (1995) remarks that “[i]f any single indicator identifies a gang banger it is the tattoo” (p. 7; see also Lunde 2009 on yakuza tattoos). According to Govenar (1998), a major purpose of gang tattoos is “to reinforce group solidarity” (p. 210). And Phillips (1999) explains: “The visual imagery expressed through … tattoos is an integral part of the process that connects gangs together and binds them into a culture” (p. 182). The symbols used by gangs typically reflect those commonly associated with other groups to which they already belong (DeMello 1993; Valentine 2000). Geographic symbols commonly adopted by gangs include an abbreviation of where they are from (e.g., “SC” for South Central), their street number, and their community’s area code (Phillips 1999). Examples of ethnic symbols include Hispanic gangs’ heavy use of Christian motifs (DeMello 1993; Govenar 1998; Valentine 1995); Cambodian and Samoan gang members incorporating bamboo-style letters in their tattoos (Phillips 1999); and white gangs representing themselves with tattoos of swastikas and four-leaf clovers (Hall 1997; Valentine 1995).\textsuperscript{b}

Yet another common theme in the literature pertains to criminals’ tattoos that represent their orientation to adversaries, such as the government or rival gang members. Referring to prisoner tattoos, DeMello (2000:70) observes that “justice is depicted (either in human form or as scales) in a way that illustrates the inequalities of the judicial system.” And Phillips (1999) recorded a former gang member’s tattoo of “Forty,” with “[t]he crossed-out ‘o’ indicate[ing] enmity with all gangs whose names end in zero” (Phillips 1999:236).

Related to gang tattoos are those representing rank within a criminal organization (DeMello 1993, 2000). As an example, consider “Nuestra Familia” tattoos symbolizing different stages of membership (Phelan and Hunt 1998). A pre-initiate signifies his compatibility and interest in the gang by acquiring a “‘northern’ identity (e.g., ‘Norte,’ Spanish for North)” tattoo, “which is the traditional territory” of the gang (p. 284). An initiate has higher rank than a pre-initiate yet “is not entitled to all of the benefits of group membership. … [I]nitiates typically wear a delicately engraved rose” (p. 286). Further up the hierarchy are member tattoos indicating full-fledged acceptance within the group; an example is having “the letters NF … inscribed, which simply indicate Nuestra Familia membership” (p. 287). At the top are veterans, or persons who have made significant achievements as members. Such individuals get tattoos representing their accomplishments, like “a tattoo of a Mexican male with a large moustache, rifle, bandolier, and a sombrero that covers his face and hides his identity. The number of bullets tattooed on the bandolier represent how many kills the person has to his credit” (p. 292).

Conviction and time served in prison are commonly cited as the meaning of criminals’ tattoos, as well. For instance, French offenders have been known to put dots on the fingers to symbolize imprisonment (Hesselt van Dinter 2005). A gang member tattooed a spider web on his neck to mark the third year of his sentence (Phillips, 1999). Phelan and Hunt (1998) mention a “CYA” tattoo that stands for a juvenile correctional facility—California Youth Authority—where the offender had been institutionalized. Hall (1997:11) describes a “tattoo of a rectangle of prison bars with the date of incarceration written below it.” And DeMello (2000:69) comments that “[t]he most easily readable prison tattoo is located under the outside corner of the eye and is called the tear. A tear on a man’s face is a sign of his imprisonment (or sometimes, of having committed murder), and more than one

\textsuperscript{a}Of course, a person can acquire a tattoo that specifically represents pain or political disaffection. This means that a tattoo’s specific and general meaning may be one in the same.

\textsuperscript{b}The association signified by gang tattoos is not an all or none phenomenon. Rather, the degree of commitment to the gang is signaled by the intricacy, size, and placement of the gang tattoo. Specifically, tattoos that are more ornate, larger, or located on more visible parts of the body—such as the face, neck, or hand—indicate more commitment to the group they represent (Phelan and Hunt 1998).
tenth usually refers to more than one prison term” (DeMello 2000:69; see also DeMello 1993; Hall 1997; Phillips 1999).

Although less frequently found in the literature than the meanings outlined above, at least some tattoos of criminals are principally a matter of aesthetics. A gang member known to Phillips (1999:166), for example, invoked “it was just pretty” to explain the butterfly tattoo on his arm. Tattoos motivated by beauty appear particularly important to prostitutes, who are thought to acquire tattoos to entire customers and thereby increase proceeds (Parry 1934). Writing almost a decade ago, Post (1969) claims “prostitutes frequently become tattooed, having found that designs sexually stimulate certain clients” (p. 519). Referring to the Middle East, Hesselt van Dinter (2005) notes that “[u]ntil the nineteenth century, tattoos were a way of titillating men. All Arabic prostitutes had purely decorative tattoos on their hands, arms and especially their breasts” (p. 178); also, prostitutes in Algeria and Morocco were known to have “flirtatious tattoos” (p. 191).

**Classic conceptions of tattoo meaning**

Scholarship on what tattoos symbolize is far from new. During the rise of modern day social science, researchers were captivated by this topic. Among Western scholars, tattooing was an exotic phenomenon that both stimulated and boggled the mind. Why would anyone cut themselves to permanently stain their skin? Three academic giants directly answered that question: Darwin ([1879] 2004) theorizes tattooing in *Descent of Man*; Durkheim ([1912] 2001) does so in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; and Lombroso ([1885] 2006) examined the topic in several works, most notably *Criminal Man* (see also Lombroso [1893] 2004, 1896).

Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso theorized the ultimate cause of tattooing to be, respectively, sexual selection/competition, collective functioning, and atavism. Yet they also wrote about the specific meaning of tattoos, and had largely different ideas in this regard. When combined, their conceptions provide the basis for a typology of tattoo meaning. Darwin saw tattoos as about attraction; for Durkheim, as representing group membership; and while Lombroso was less elegant in this regard, he thought of tattoos as communicating beliefs, passions, and identity. These three conceptions are described below.

**Darwin’s conception**

While recognizing the cultural differences between human groups, Darwin ([1879] 2004) was struck by the multitude of similarities between them. He wrote that one “can hardly fail to be deeply impressed with the close similarity between the men of all races in tastes, dispositions and habits. This is shown,” in part, “by the pleasure which they all take in … tattooing” (pp. 207–208). Referring to anthropological accounts of tribal societies, Darwin remarked that “[n]ot one great country can be named, from the Polar regions in the north to New Zealand in the south, in which the aborigines do not tattoo themselves. This practice was followed by the Jews of old, and by the ancient Britons” (p. 641). To Darwin, such cultural likenesses served as evidence that different races were members of the same species.

Yet why would tattooing be common across human groups?³ Darwin suggested that social learning is not entirely responsible. Rather, “the close similarity in the mind of man” (p. 644) produces similar evaluations of physical attractiveness. Though careful not to overstate the amount of congruence in such assessments, he subscribed to the notion that people find beauty in slightly pronounced versions of their group’s average traits (but see Langlois and Roggman 1990; Rhodes 2006). As Darwin ([1879] 2004:652) put it:

³This question is particularly interesting from an evolutionary perspective because tattooing, especially in the era of premodern medicine, came with the risk of serious infection and even death (Coe 2003; Gilbert 2000:113; Hesselt van Dinter 2005:44; Jones 1987:143).
If all our women were to become as beautiful as the Venus de’ Medici, we should for a time be charmed; but we should soon wish for variety; and as soon as we had obtained variety, we should wish to see certain characters a little exaggerated beyond the then existing common standard.

Seen in that light, a tattoo may be thought of as an adornment that adds variety to the bodily aesthetic and thereby attracts attention. Contemporary research suggests there is something to that idea; for instance, one study employing an eye-tracking device found that persons spend more time looking at people who are tattooed than not (Wohlrab et al. 2007).

Physical attractiveness is important in Darwin’s theory of evolution because it affects the odds of copulation and thereby passing on one’s genes. Citing the same anthropological evidence mentioned above, Darwin ([1879] 2004) concluded that “savages pay the greatest attention to their personal appearance” (p. 640) and that tattoos enhance it. For instance, “[i]n Africa some of the natives tattoo themselves, . . . and these are considered by the inhabitants ’to be great personal attractions’” (p. 641), even “irresistible” (p. 643). “In the Arab countries no beauty can be perfect until the cheeks ‘or temples have been gashed’” (p. 641).

I was told by the missionaries in New Zealand, that when they tried to persuade some girls to give up the practice, they answered, “We must just have a few lines on our lips; else when we grow old we shall be so very ugly. With the men of New Zealand . . . ‘to have fine tattooed faces was . . . to render themselves attractive to the ladies’.”

**Durkheim’s conception**

Durkheim’s ([1912] 2001) theory of tattooing is part of his work on religion, the origin of which he sought to explain by analyzing data on Australian aborigines and, to a lesser extent, other tribal groups. In such societies, Durkheim suggests, the clan is the prime component of social life. There are two essential, and interrelated, features of a clan. First, members think of themselves as bonded by an almost kinship-like force: “they regard each other as part of the same family . . . solely because they are collectively designated by the same word” (p. 88). Members of a clan recognize that they owe each the same obligations found among kin, such as “assistance, vengeance, mourning . . ., and so on” (p. 88). The second defining feature is tied to the first: “the name it bears is also that of a definite species of material things with which it believes it has very special relations. . ., namely relations of kinship” (p. 88).

The thing that defines the clan is its “totem.” Totemism is a religious system that maintains a supernatural force runs through everything but is not anything material per se. “In other words, totemism is the religion of certain animals, men, or images, but of a kind of anonymous and impersonal force that is found in each of these beings though identical with none. . . . It animates generations today just as it animated those of the past and will animate those to come” (pp. 140–141). A clan comes to select a particular species—such as a lizard, snake, or kangaroo—as the embodiment of the supernatural force (i.e. as its totem): “the material form in which that immaterial substance is represented” (p. 141). Thus, what links clansmen to each other and their totem is this supernatural force, and in that respect they are kin and obliged to care for each other.

Symbolically, the totem not only gives the clan a name, but also an emblem: “a virtual coat of arms” (p. 94). From a collective standpoint, having an emblem serves at least a couple important, and again interrelated, functions.

[One function is as a] rallying point. Expressing social unity in a material form makes it more tangible to everyone. . . . Moreover, this idea must have sprung spontaneously from the conditions of common life, for the emblem is not only a convenient method of clarifying society’s awareness of itself, it actually creates this feeling: it is a basic element of this feeling. (p. 175)

Put succinctly, a totemic emblem produces and sustains a sense of mutual obligations among clansmen.

Clansmen drew their emblems on many surfaces, such as weapons, the dirt, and trees (p. 94). Another place is the skin, either by painting onto or cutting into it. Clearly, this is where Durkheim’s theory of religion becomes relevant to understanding tattoos. While noting that “tattoos made through mutilation or scarring do not always have a totemic meaning” (p. 96), he provided many examples of where this is the case: “the first Christians imprinted the name of Christ or the sign of the cross on their skin” (p. 177);
“groups of pilgrims on their way to Palestine also tattooed designs on their arms or wrists representing the cross or the monogram of Christ” (p. 177). Durkheim notes that tattoos also represent non-religious groups; for instance, “[t]he same practice has often been observed among soldiers in the same company, sailors on the same ship, and prisoners in the same detention facility” (p. 177).

As alluded to above, the benefit of being tattooed with one’s totem—or any group symbol—is the embodied emblem creates and sustains a sense of collective awareness (i.e., a rallying point and mutual obligations), while invoking respect for and from fellows (see pp. 156–68, 262–269). Notably, Durkheim went so far as to claim that “[t]he best way of attesting to oneself and to others that we are part of the same group is to imprint the same distinctive mark on the body” (p. 177, emphasis added).

**Lombroso’s conception**

Unlike Darwin and Durkheim, Lombroso was chiefly concerned with explaining criminals’ tattoos. Based on surveys conducted by himself and others, Lombroso ([1885] 2006) observed that criminals are tattooed more often than are non-criminals. He remarks, for instance, that “while out of 2,739 soldiers—a sort of control group—“tattoo marks [were found] only among 1.2 per cent [of them], . . . among 5,348 criminals, 667 were tattooed, or ten per cent of the adults and 3.9 per cent of the minors” (Lombroso 1896:793).

Lombroso ([1885] 2006, 1896) argued that the reason behind such variation is atavism. To be clear, atavism is “[a] primitive form of humanity”; an atavist is “a throwback to an earlier evolutionary stage in which humans were more savage, animalistic, and criminal than today” (Gibson and Rafter 2006:402). Lombroso ([1885] 2006:62) was under the impression that “not a single primitive tribe . . . does not use tattooing” and figured it is “only natural that a custom widespread among savages and prehistoric peoples would reappear among” offenders.

According to Lombroso, atavists are predisposed to both offending and tattooing, which is why these two behaviors are correlated (i.e., atavism is their common cause). But why would atavism manifest itself in tattoos? Lombroso suggests the desire to communicate with drawings rather than words is instinctual to atavists: “Tattoos function as pictographs for criminals as they do for savages. Criminals use pictographs . . . to pour out their thoughts rather than to hide them” (pp. 239–240).

While Lombroso thought the ultimate cause of much tattooing is atavism, he too was concerned with the proximal causes: what tattoos are “about” to the wearers. Recall that for Darwin and Durkheim, tattoos are about attraction and association, respectively. For Lombroso, the meaning of tattoos is more complex or more disorganized, depending on the reader’s interpretation of his work. In the available English literature, the closest he comes to a defining statement is “[t]attoos are external signs of beliefs and passions” (p. 58). He gives many examples of this, two of which are chest tattoos reading “I swear to revenge myself” and “I will come to a miserable end” (p. 59). An example from the contemporary literature is a skull meaning “Death is no big deal” (Hall 1997:12). However, Lombroso also gave a number of tattoo examples that do not appear to be either a belief or passion. The other major meaning evidenced in his work is the wearer’s identity (Lombroso [1885] 2006), including “his origins,” “important events of his life” (p. 60), his “profession” (p. 58), and “sad adventures” (Lombroso 1896:797).³

³The presentation of Lombroso’s ([1885] 2006) conception has been purposefully oversimplified. He also refers to tattoos as being about “vanity” and “camaraderie” or “sect” ([1885] 2006:61; see also Lombroso 1896), and thus there is some overlap between his view and those of Darwin and Durkheim. The latter two scholars took a coherent approach to theorizing, and therefore their conceptions of what tattoos symbolize were restricted to matters of attraction and association. But Lombroso did not work that way. As explained by one of the foremost historians of criminology, Nicole Rafter (personal correspondence, October 2013), “L [ombroso] was not the most logical man, nor did he mind contradicting himself, nor did he go back to check past statements. He just wrote fast, whatever came into his head most of the time. That’s my impression. . . . This was not a precise, together guy.” It could be argued that Lombroso’s conception of tattoo meaning is so broad that if fully adopted it becomes worthless as an organizing framework. As the old adage goes, a theory of everything is a theory of nothing; in the present case, a conception of tattoos as meaning anything is a meaningless conception. Furthermore, we should not be surprised to find that there is some overlap between the conceptions of Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso. After all, these theorists worked independently from each other. Given Lombroso’s helter-skelter approach relative to the disciplined ones of Darwin and Durkheim, the term “Lombrosian” herein will strictly refer to tattoos about a belief, passion, or identity, even though Lombroso also mentioned vanity and group membership. However, note that who is given credit for each category is truly a secondary concern, as the primary purpose is to produce a typology of criminal tattoo meaning.
Analyzing criminals’ tattoos

To summarize the article thus far, there are various connections between criminals and tattoos. One area of inquiry is what criminals’ tattoos symbolize. Contemporary works sheds light on that topic, but it lacks an elegant, comprehensive, and theoretically informed typology. Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso arrived at largely distinct conceptions of tattoo meaning. “Darwinian tattoos” are about attraction; “Durkheimian tattoos” are about group membership; “Lombrosian tattoos” are about beliefs, passions, and identity. When combined, their conceptions constitute a typology of what criminals’ tattoos represent. Though there is evidence that each of these conceptions is relevant to criminals’ tattoos, it is an open question whether this typology provides a practical and exhaustive basis for categorizing them. Thus, the article now turns to analyzing a sample of criminals’ tattoos to see whether and to what extent they fit within Darwinian, Durkheimian, or Lombrosian conceptions of tattoo meaning. As detailed further below, the analysis also serves to expand the Darwinian and Durkheimian conceptions of what tattoos mean.

Data and method

The data for this study are “Russian criminal tattoos” documented by Danzig Baldaev (1925–2005). Herein, the term Russian will be used as synonymous with Soviet, although clearly they are distinct in many respects (Applebaum 2003).6 Baldaev was employed as a prison guard by the Soviet Ministry of the Interior between 1948 and 1986 (FUEL 2014b). During that time he collected scrupulous details about thousands of Russian criminal tattoos.7 His interest in criminal tattoos began early on in his career (Baldaev 2003). Although he received no formal academic training, he learned the ethnographic craft from his father—an “eminent Buryat folklore specialist and ethno-grapher” (p. 17). While visiting his father, Baldaev shared sketches he had drawn of some prisoner tattoos. The father saw value in these drawings and so encouraged his son to “collect the tattoos, the convicts’ customs,” warning that otherwise “it will all go to the grave with them” (p. 23).

Baldaev heeded his father’s advice, and, as he explains, “[f]or thirty-three years . . . collected material on the language and folklore of the criminal world. . . . I travelled four times from Leningrad to Vladivostok and visited dozens of corrective labour camps and colonies” (p. 23). Baldaev’s decades of data collection across the Soviet terrain culminated in more than 3,000 detailed ink drawings of male and female tattoos, most accompanied by a note about its meaning and history (FUEL 2014b). These drawings were more than academic, as they also served a crime control function. The infamous Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB), among other agencies, supported his work because “[t]hey realised the value of being able to establish the facts about a convict or criminal: his date and place of birth, the crimes he had committed, the camps where he had served time, and even his psychological profile” (Baldaev 2003:23).

Baldaev (2003) published his research in several forms, but it has received the most attention since appearing as part of a three volume set, titled Russian Criminal Tattoo Encylopaedia (FUEL 2003, 2006, 2008). These volumes are published by a London-based design group, FUEL (2014b), which subsequently purchased the complete Baldaev tattoo archive from his widow in 2009. The main feature of each Encylopaedia is hundreds of Baldaev’s drawings and associated notes, though each volume also includes photographs of prisoner tattoos by Vasiliev (FUEL 2014b) and scholarly writings on the topic (Applebaum, 2006; Pluster-Sarno, 2003, 2006; Sidorov, 2008a, 2008b); and for Volume I, Baldaev (2003) wrote a foreword, from which the above biographical and methodological details are drawn.

6For the history and other details about Russian criminal tattoos, see Applebaum (2006); Bronnikov (1993); Pluster-Sarno (2003, 2006); and Varese (2001). For a review of the Encyclopaedia, see Antonopoulos (2009). For other works on Russian prisoner tattoos, see, for example, Applebaum (2003:287–288), FUEL (2014a), and Lambert (2003).
7For a similar data collection effort in Russia, see Bronnikov (1993) and FUEL (2014a); in a California prison, see Phelan and Hunt (1998).
The tattoo drawings contained in the *Encylopaedia* serve as the data for the present study. Note that the limitations of this data will be outlined in the article’s concluding section. The process of analyzing the tattoos unfolded as follows. First, each page of each volume with a tattoo drawing was scanned and made into a Portal Document Format (PDF) file. Most pages contain a single tattoo with accompanying background material, but some pages have multiple tattoos of which each may or may not have accompanying background material. Because the unit of analysis in this study is the tattoo, a PDF was made for each tattoo. Then the PDFs were uploaded into Atlas.ti 7, which is a qualitative software program that is particularly well-suited for analyzing images because it allows for individual parts of each image to be separately coded. Fifteen pages of tattoos were excluded because each tattoo was not accompanied by background material. Where it appears, the background material includes information on the tattoo’s subjective meaning, which, of course, is crucial to understanding what any given tattoo symbolizes. Thus, tattoos without accompanying background information are more likely to be misinterpreted, and that is why they were excluded from analysis. There are 889 tattoos in the final sample. The remainder of the coding process is inextricably tied up with the findings and, therefore, is described below in the course of presenting results.

**Findings I**

Each drawing of a criminal’s tattoo was coded as strictly about attraction (i.e., “Darwinian”), association (i.e., “Durkheimian”), a belief, passion, or identity (i.e., “Lombrosian”). Thirty tattoos had insufficient background information to make a confident categorization and therefore were omitted; therefore, the percentages below are based on a sample of 859 tattoos. Table 1 provides a summary of the results.

A single tattoo is about attraction: flowers found above a lady’s ankle. The background for it reads, “[Such d]ecorative tattoos . . . are especially popular among promiscuous women and prostitutes” (FUEL 2008:295). This tattoo is about attraction in that it is “decorative” and popular among women with a reputation for frequent sexual contact with multiple partners. No other tattoo in the *Encylopaedia* has an evident connection to attraction. To be clear, this does not mean that no other tattoo is attractive, but only that they are not about attraction per se.

Seventy-six, or 8.85%, of all tattoos are about association. Most of these (\(n = 51\)) reflect membership and support for a nationality, government, ethnicity, or religion. Examples include a picture of Peter the Great that represents “To Holy Russia, United and Indivisible” (FUEL 2003:168–169), and the Star of David surrounded by “I’m a Jew—from the Palestinian Branch” (FUEL 2008:290). Sixteen of the association tattoos signify a bloodline or involvement in an intimate relationship; respective examples are a thumb tattoo that means “I’m following in my father’s footsteps” (FUEL 2003:132), and a male cat embracing a female cat with “separation is hell when you’re not beside me” written beneath (FUEL 2003:152). Nine association tattoos are about criminal ties. These often come in the form of tattooed “rings” on the fingers (e.g., FUEL 2003:304–305, 306–307; FUEL 2006:300–301).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorist</th>
<th>What tattoo symbolizes</th>
<th>859 tattoos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darwinian</td>
<td>Attraction</td>
<td>1 (~0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durkheimian</td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>76 (8.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lombroso</td>
<td>Belief, passion, identity</td>
<td>782 (91.04%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Sum does not equal 100% due to rounding.*

8The actual images may not be reproduced here due to copyright protections.

9Clearly, then, the *Encylopaedia* does not include all of the Baldaev drawings, of which there are about 3,000 (FUEL 2014b). Why some tattoos but not others are included in the volume is unknown. Thus, the findings are not necessarily representative of the Baldaev archive, much less so “Russian criminal tattoos” of course. This is further discussed in the conclusion section.
The vast majority of tattoos—91.04% of the sample (n = 782)—are about a belief, passion, or life history. Among these, almost 60% (n = 464) signify a belief or passion. For instance, a belief is expressed by a tattoo that consists of a smiling, cowboy hat wearing, cigar smoking skull floating on a cloud, with text beneath that reads “Death is always close—it is a release from earthly suffering. A thief is not afraid of death” (FUEL 2003:118). A passion is represented by a tattoo of a syringe paralleling “I love a high” (FUEL 2006:268). A little more than a third (n = 281) of Lombrosian tattoos capture the wearer’s identity. One such tattoo is of a church with two domed steeples, each of which represents a criminal conviction (FUEL 2006:306). Twenty-two tattoos combine elements of belief or passion and identity; these typically involve a motto pertaining to a belief or passion alongside a significant date in the person’s life or an abbreviation for the criminal conviction or place of institutionalization (e.g., FUEL 2006:140, 2008:209). Fifteen of the tattoos are clearly Lombrosian—that is, obviously not about attraction or association—but did not have enough information to assuredly categorize them as a matter of belief, passion, or life history.

**Findings II**

While not intended, the coding of criminals’ tattoos organically led to an expansion of what tattoos mean from the Darwinian and Durkheimian perspectives; these two ideas are presented below. Though not about attraction or camaraderie, it became evident that some of the criminals’ tattoos nonetheless reflect Darwin’s and Durkheim’s theoretical understanding of social life. Thus, the following insights expand the Darwinian and Durkheimian conceptions of tattoo meaning.

**Expanding Durkheim’s conception**

One of the emergent findings relates to Durkheim’s theory of tattooing. Recall that he suggested persons mark their body with signs of the group to which they belong, as this continually makes them aware of mutual obligations and serves as a rallying point. Thus, such tattoos are “pro-association.” The opposite is “anti-association.” An anti-association tattoo signifies the wearer’s opposition to a group or groups. For the first analysis, anti-association tattoos were mostly coded as Lombrosian in that they represented a belief that a group is bad or a passion against a group.10 Yet in the course of making those codes, it became evident that anti-association tattoos also have a place in Durkheim’s conception of tattoos.

In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, to be clear, Durkheim wrote solely about tattoos as representing membership in a clan, or pro-membership; nowhere therein did he examine anti-association tattoos. Yet theoretically speaking, it is reasonable to speculate that anti-association tattoos serve a collective function like that of pro-association tattoos. Rather than serve as a rallying point for a group, anti-association tattoos may serve to rally wearers against an enemy, such as a rival gang or an oppressive government. Moreover, such tattoos may remind the wearer that they should not provide “assistance, vengeance, mourning . . ., and so on” to enemies, but only the opposite. And while not a “totem” *per se*, some anti-association tattoos incorporate unflattering imageries of the disdained group; an example is a government official with a tail and devil horns. Instead of “a virtual coat of arms,” such imagery amounts to a virtual quartered body.

The anti-association standpoint is reflected in many of the coded tattoos, 263 to be exact (30.6% of entire sample). Among the anti-association tattoos, 247 (93.5%) are a matter of being against a particular nationality, government, ethnicity, or religion. One such tattoo is of Boris Yeltsin with a pig snout that reads, “The head commie werewolf of the lousy Soviets” (FUEL 2006:168); another is the image of a Nazi soldier putting unflatteringly caricatured Jews into a furnace (FUEL 2006:263). Eight of the anti-association tattoos are expressions of disdain for breakers of thieves’ law, which is

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10 Thirty-eight of the anti-association tattoos have pro-association elements, too, and therefore were coded as Durkheimian in the initial round of analysis.
an informal set of rules and punishments maintained by offenders in and outside of prison (for details, see Applebaum 2003, 2006; Pluster-Sarno 2003). Examples of tattoos demonstrating opposition to persons who break thieves’ law include an elephant with an acronym on it that means “Death to narks by the knife” (FUEL 2006:280), and a “Beat Bitches” tattoo on the eyelids (p. 267). Seven of the anti-association tattoos represent an anti-women orientation; this category is exemplified by an image of a lion’s mouth clutching a severed female head alongside text that reads “Death to whores!” (FUEL 2003:223). One of the anti-association tattoos was against multiple groups, as it is anti-government, anti-Semitic, and anti-“bitches” (i.e., breakers of thieves’ law).

Thirty-eight of the anti-association tattoos have pro-association elements, too. According to Durkheim’s logic, these tattoos may dually serve to remind the wearer of his or her obligations to fellow members and not to aid or pity the enemy. Similarly, these tattoos may serve both as a rallying point for one’s group and against the opposition. Several pro- and anti-association tattoos depict a nation or military unit fought for and also against, such as Germans against Soviets (FUEL 2008:112) and Soviets against Afghans (FUEL 2003:279). Other examples of pro- and anti-association tattoos are those of mafia members that read “President, you have no teeth! We are everywhere! Cede power to us” (FUEL 2003:142) and “We are a great force—we shall take power and disband the Russian Duma” (p. 287).

Expanding Darwin’s conception

A second emergent finding concerns Darwin’s conception of tattoo meaning. As reviewed above, he focused on the attraction-generating properties of tattoos because this has implications for his theory of evolution, specifically the part about sexual selection and reproduction. Yet tattoos are potentially relevant to at least one other facilitator of gene transfer: survival. Men who live longer have more time to procreate; this is also true for women, up to a certain age. In and outside of prison, a determinant of survival is status (e.g., Applebaum 2003; Isaacs and Schroder 2004).

It is well known that often prisons are dangerous. That was especially true in Russian prisons. There, reaching the end of one’s sentence was far from certainty. As one prisoner put it, “After only three weeks [inside] most of the prisoners were broken men, interested in nothing but eating. They behaved like animals, disliked and suspected everyone else, seeing in yesterday’s friend a competitor in the struggle for survival” (quoted in Applebaum 2003:347). At the time of Baldaev’s data collection, threats to survival included starvation, freezing temperatures, disease, guards, and fellow inmates (Applebaum 2003). Guards controlled who entered and exited prisons, but they were notorious for letting inmates sort out the internal order for themselves. For that reason, the prisoner hierarchy was extremely important (ibid.). In large part, status therein was determined by someone’s criminal career: its length, accomplishments, or failures (Pluster-Sarno 2003, 2006).

High status criminals had the power to decide, for instance, the size of a person’s food ration, where someone could sleep, and what jobs they would perform (Applebaum 2003). Those belonging to the upper rank were privy to the best of everything. At the opposite extreme, low status convicts slept on the floor, received crumbs, and were responsible for the dirtiest and hardest work. The worst “jobs” included working in sub-zero conditions, cleaning human waste, and being a sex slave, all of which increase the chance of contracting disease and becoming gravely ill. Moreover, high status criminals were insulated from physical attack because such affronts were punishable by certain death. Low status inmates were not afforded such protections, leaving them susceptible to both predatory and retaliatory violence. All of these status-based differences likely affected survival rates in prison and thus the opportunity to procreate when freed.

Tattoos served as visible signs of offenders’ rank and thereby guided how each person was treated. As explained by Pluster-Sarno (2003:27):

[T]hese tattoos embody a thief’s complete “service record”, his entire biography. They detail all of his achievements and failures, his promotions and demotions, his “secondments” to jail and his “transfers” to
different types of “work”. A thief’s tattoos are his “passport”, “case file”, “awards record”, “diplomas” and “epitaphs”. In other words, his full set of official bureaucratic documents. Therefore, in the world of thieves a man with no tattoos has no social status whatsoever. In the thieves’ argot such a man is known as a petushok (cockerel), and in a prison camp he immediately acquires the status of a chukhan (stooge).

Of course, as an inmate spends more time in a particular prison, their rank comes to be known by fellow inmates and thus becomes less dependent on visible tattoos. However, new prisoners are constantly arriving, and so tattoos continually serve as a useful guide to the unacquainted. And on that note, criminals did not always serve time in the same prison, as they may be transferred or reconvicted after recidivating, and thus tattoos served as a record of rank—for better or worse—that affected how one was treated and odds of survival.

In the first round of coding, tattoos about status were coded as a matter of identity (i.e., Lombrosian). For the second analysis, status tattoos were recoded as Darwinian owing to their potential effect on survival and, in turn, the opportunity to reproduce. Among the 281 identity tattoos initially coded as Lombrosian, 110 of those—or about 13% of the entire sample—represent the wearer’s status in prison or the criminal world more broadly. Thirty of those signify high status. The most common of such tattoos are ones indicating the person is a “legitimate thief,” criminal “boss” or “authority,” examples of which include a skull wearing a crown (FUEL 2003:117) and a tattooed ring with a crown at its center (e.g., FUEL 2006:132–133). Three status tattoos distinguished the wearer as high status among a low status group, specifically the “untouchables [who] do not have the right to touch food, tobacco and other items belonging to the other convicts, who would be tainted by any contact” (p. 190). Various high ranking members of this group, such as the “head cockerel” (p. 191), “papa” and “mama” (p. 190), have a tattoo of a chicken head wearing a crown. Seventy-seven of the status tattoos are a mark of low rank. For instance, an unambiguous label such as “Rat-thief” (FUEL 2003:154), “Pederast” (FUEL 2006:271), or “Informer” (FUEL 2008:236–7) is tattooed on a constantly visible part of the body, such as the forehead.

A good question is why would anyone have a mark of low status tattooed on their body? What Darwin nor Durkheim or Lombroso never seem to have considered—and maybe simply did not know of—is that criminals forcibly tattoo other offenders. “Forshmachnye or shaming tattoos were forcibly applied in order to stigmatise the wearer” (Sidorov 2008b:383). Typically, the communiqué pertained to a former misdeed of the tattoo wearer, as evidenced by the above examples. We see, then, that criminals engage in the same practice as government officials who punitively tattooed offenders.

**Expanded coding summary**

As detailed above, two novel conceptual and theoretical ideas arose in the course of conducting the first round of coding. It became evident that anti-associations and status tattoos—formerly coded as matters of belief, passion, or identity (i.e., Lombrosian)—are also relevant to the Durkheimian and Darwinian conceptions of tattoos, respectively. Thus, the second round of coding was dedicated to determining how many of the Encyclopaedia tattoos fit within those categories. Table 2 provides a summary of the second set of results.

For a summary of the coding protocol used to generate the first and second set of findings presented herein, refer to Appendix A.

**Conclusion: Marking out the implications**

The literature shows that criminals’ tattoos represent many things, but, to date, the approach has been piecemeal. As such, the understanding of what criminals’ tattoos symbolize has been more complex than perhaps necessary from a conceptual or theoretical standpoint. After all, it is widely accepted that good concepts and good theories are simple ones, all else equal (Kuhn 1977; Popper
To address the lack of conceptual order, the ideas of Darwin, Durkheim, and Lombroso were pieced together, the product of which was a typology of tattoo meaning. The first round of coding revealed that almost none are about attraction; some are about association; and a large percentage reflect a wearer's belief, passion, or identity. An unexpected outcome of that analysis was an expansion of what tattoos mean from the Darwinian and Durkheimian perspectives.

In neither *Descent of Man* nor *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is the theoretical relevance of status or anti-association tattoos specified. Yet when thought of in light of Darwin's evolutionary theory and Durkheim's theory of collectives, it becomes clear that status and anti-association tattoos can be respectively understood in light of those theories. Indeed, those tattoos and theories "help" each other: the theories shed light on why criminals acquire tattoos of particular meanings, while the tattoos serve to expand those scholars' theoretically informed conceptions of what tattoos represent.

When combined and expanded, Darwin's, Durkheim's, and Lombroso's conceptions of tattoo meaning constitute a typology consisting of the following categories: attraction, status, pro-association, anti-association, belief, passion, and identity. To be clear, these categories are not mutually exclusive; tattoos can be both pro- and anti-association, for instance. So far as the author can tell, this typology encompasses every meaning of criminals' tattoos that has been heretofore documented. One path for future research is to determine whether that is true. If not, researchers need not discard the typology altogether, but instead should expand it as needed.

Obviously, the research on which this article is based has limitations, foremost among which is the quantitative procedure. While a useful starting point for determining the value of the proposed typology, the generalizability of the results is unknown. In part, this limitation stems from a lack of details regarding Baldaev's sampling procedure, including how many offenders from whom he obtained data. Plus, it is unknown why the publisher printed some tattoos but not others. It is possible that Baldaev selectively documented tattoos and the publisher selectively published them. Thus, the above statistics are not meant to be seen as a representative statement on the proportion of tattoo meanings found on criminals in Russia or elsewhere. Moreover, the dataset precluded any analysis of whether and to what extent the typology captures non-criminals' tattoos.11

What the quantitative analysis provides, however, is a guide for how future research could quantitatively explore the topic and to what end. There are at least three connected paths, in addition to those mentioned above. The first is conceptual: to document the frequency at which tattoos of various meanings are found on offenders. The second and third steps are theory-oriented: to explore whether certain types of criminals are likelier to get tattooed with particular meanings, and whether tattoos of different meanings differently affect social life. For example, perhaps prostitutes and gang members are likelier to obtain attraction tattoos and association tattoos, respectively; and, it could be that attraction tattoos are less detrimental than gang tattoos to job prospects or otherwise assimilating into law-abiding society (see Gambetta 2009). Those are the

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11For research on non-criminals' tattoos, see, for example, Atkinson (2003), Caplan (2000), DeMello (2000), Ellis (2008), Hewitt (1997), Kuwahara (2005), Sanders and Vail (2008), and Thomas, Cole, and Douglas (2005).
kinds of connections that quantitative research could illuminate by counting and analyzing the qualitative properties of criminals’ tattoos.

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this article to Nicole Rafter, who graciously answered my many questions about Lombroso. I also thank Andrea Allen for her comments on an earlier draft.

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Appendix A. Coding protocol

Step 1: Exclude pages that do not have background material for each tattoo.
Step 2: For each tattoo, examine drawing in tandem with background material.

- Code as “Darwinian—Strict” if refers to:
  - Attraction
- Code as “Darwinian—Expanded” if refers to:
  - High status
  - Low status and mentions forced application of tattoo
  - High status in low status group without mention of forced application of tattoo
- Code as “Durkehimian—Strict” if refers to:
  - Pro-association (i.e., membership in a group, but not status therein)
- Code as “Durkehimian—Expanded” if refers to:
  - Anti-association (i.e., opposition to a group)
- Code as “Lombrosian—Broad” if refers to:
  - Belief, passion, or identity other than attraction or pro-association
- Code as “Lombrosian—Narrowed” if refers to:
  - Belief, passion, or identity other than attraction, status, or association
- Code as “Unclear” if:
  - Insufficient background to categorize into above categories

Note: “Findings I” section of article includes incidence of tattoos in following categories: Darwinian—Strict; Durkheimian—Strict; and, Lombrosian—Broad. “Findings II” section of article includes incidence of tattoos in following categories: Darwinian—Strict; Darwinian—Expanded; Durkheimian—Strict; Durkheimian—Expanded; and Lombrosian—Narrowed.