

PRISON TATTOOS IN THE CONTEXT OF IDENTITY AND GROUP AFFILIATION

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Abstract

This article examines tattooing in prison as a structured social practice rather than a purely individual act of body decoration. Drawing on long-term qualitative research conducted in Czech prisons since 2013, including ethnographic observation, interviews with inmates and staff, and systematic documentation of tattoo motifs, placement, and modes of acquisition, the study analyses how tattoos operate within the social order of imprisonment. Findings show that tattoos function as a coded visual language through which inmates communicate identity, affiliation, credibility, and status. In certain internally regulated groups, access to specific motifs is restricted and their use is tied to an acknowledged position within the group. In this context, tattooing becomes a form of symbolic capital: it is visible, collectively recognized, and subject to enforcement by others rather than controlled solely by the individual. The analysis further demonstrates that the meaning of a tattoo is not defined only by the motif, but also by its placement on the body, its visibility in everyday interaction, and the conditions under which it was acquired. Tattoos obtained at the cost of physical pain and institutional risk are read as evidence of resilience and reliability, whereas coercively imposed tattoos may serve as instruments of humiliation and long-term subordination. These dynamics indicate that tattooing in prison should not be viewed only as an issue of discipline or as a simple marker of “criminal identity,” but as a medium through which hierarchy is maintained, autonomy is negotiated, and power is exercised on and through the body.

Keywords: Tattooing in Prison, Symbolic Capital, Inmate Hierarchy, Bodily Marking, Carceral Identity

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Introduction

Tattooing is one of the oldest known forms of corporeal visual communication. It functions as ornament (Gallè *et al.*, 2021; Gell, 1993), protection (Jerrentrup, 2024; Tannenbaum, 1987), a marker of social status (Dirga *et al.*, 2015; Gell, 1993; Lochmannová, 2020b; Rychlík, 2022), an instrument of coercion (Gustafson, 1997; Lochmannová, 2020b), and a declaration of group affiliation (Lochmannová and Kolář, 2021). Across historical and cultural contexts, tattooing has operated both as an act of deliberate self-inscription and as an imposed practice carried out by others without the consent of the marked individual (Rychlík, 2005). In some societies, it has signified maturity, courage, ritual obligation, or religious commitment (Gell, 1993; Jerrentrup, 2024; Tannenbaum, 1987). In others, it has served as punishment and as a permanent tool of social exclusion that renders the bearer identifiable and, at the same time, socially erased (Gustafson, 1997; Jones, 1987; Rychlík, 2005). The same procedure of inserting pigment into the skin can therefore operate as an inscription of honor or as an inscription of disgrace (Lochmannová, 2020b; Rychlík, 2005; Tannenbaum, 1987). This fundamental ambivalence is essential for understanding the role of tattoos in criminal subcultures and in the prison environment.

In the contemporary prison environment, tattooing does not function solely as aesthetic decoration but operates as a shared code. The tattooed body becomes a carrier of information about the wearer's identity, affiliations, and standing. Because the institution of imprisonment restricts the possibilities of self-presentation and standardizes the inmate's appearance, tattooing offers a means to partially contest this control, to reclaim one's own body, and to publicly declare who one is and where one belongs (Lochmannová, 2017, 2020b). Prison may be understood as a “total institution,” that is, a setting in which the individual is deprived of personal autonomy, subjected to continuous surveillance, and systematically stripped of a prior social identity (Goffman, 1961). The process through which the individual adapts to this institutional logic, internalizes subcultural norms, and acquires a position within the internal hierarchy of the prison community is referred to as prisonization (Clemmer, 1940). Within this process, accepting and displaying tattoos is not merely an aesthetic decision but a practice of incorporation, a strategy of survival, and an affirmation of loyalty (Lochmannová, 2019, 2020b).

Tattooing within the prison environment transmits information on several levels simultaneously. First, it communicates the wearer's personal history, including experience with criminal activity, violence, or the prison economy. Second, it signals the individual's current position within the group and the degree of acceptance accorded by other inmates. Finally, it functions as a visual declaration of loyalty toward a specific group or alliance inside the prison (Lochmannová, 2016, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Lochmannová and Kolář, 2021). In this sense, the tattooed body can be read as a text—but a text addressed only to the initiated: the meaning of particular motifs and their placement is typically intelligible to other inmates, whereas for the “official” institution it may remain deliberately ambiguous or opaque (Lochmannová, 2015).

It is important to emphasize that the meaning of a tattoo is not produced by the image alone. Equal interpretive value is carried by the placement of the motif on the body, the technical quality of its execution, the covering and layering of pre-existing tattoos, and the question of whether the symbol was “assigned” by the group or whether it represents an act of individual self-designation. Certain parts of the body function as privileged sites for tattoos that confirm high status. Other parts of the body are reserved for stigmatizing markings that signal, for example, subordination or a transgression of group rules. The same icon therefore does not necessarily have a fixed meaning in the prison environment. What matters is where the wearer carries it and under what circumstances it was acquired (Lochmannová, 2015, 2017).

In certain highly structured criminal groups, access to tattoo symbolism is regulated (Phelan and Hunt, 1998). Specific motifs cannot be worn without a “claim,” which must be justified through concrete actions, life history, or confirmation by internal authorities. In this context, tattooing does not function as arbitrary decoration but as proof of legitimacy. The unauthorized appropriation of a symbol may be understood as a serious attack on the hierarchy and may be sanctioned. Control over motifs thus operates simultaneously as control over status and as a mechanism for maintaining order within the subculture (Lochmannová, 2020a).

This text analyzes tattooing in the prison environment as a tool for delineating personal identity, declaring group affiliation, and negotiating social position. It also examines how tattoos can be read as a communicative element—in terms of both motif and placement—and how this legibility may inform our understanding of power dynamics within the prison as well as practices of penological control.

Methods

This contribution arises from the authors' long-term research interest in the prison environment, in the identities of incarcerated people, and in the symbolic economy of the body. It presents a synthetic overview of analytical findings based on qualitative research that the authors have been conducting in selected Czech prisons since 2013 and continue to the present (Dirga *et al.*, 2015; Lochmannová, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Lochmannová and Kolář, 2021). In this research, we use a combined approach that includes ethnographic observation in the setting of imprisonment, structured interviews with incarcerated persons, and interviews with members of the prison service and specialist staff. Systematic documentation of tattoos is also part of the work, both at the level of visual record (photographic evidence) and interpretive meaning. We record how the inmate interprets his or her own tattoos, how that body is read by other inmates, and how a given motif is perceived from the perspective of the institution.

Particular attention is paid to what can be described as the “second life” of incarcerated persons, that is, the informal system of rules, relationships, and sanctions that operates in parallel to the formal regime of imprisonment. This informal system plays a decisive role in determining who has authority, who is protected, who is vulnerable, and who is excluded (Dirga *et al.*, 2015). We examine how tattooing enters precisely into this space of power, negotiation, and pressure. We focus on the ways in which tattoos are used to legitimize someone's status or to challenge the status of another inmate, how they function as proof of loyalty, and how they can carry stigma – that is, operate as a visible means of marking someone as inferior within the hierarchy.

Analytically, we follow several interrelated dimensions. The first dimension is the symbolism of motifs. We describe which specific images, texts, or signs appear on inmates' bodies, how these motifs are explained by the wearers themselves, and what shared collective meanings other inmates attach to them. We document both broadly circulating motifs, such as religious symbols, patriotic iconography, and representations of strength, defiance, or suffering, and motifs that are highly specific to particular subcultures.

The second dimension is placement. We examine which parts of the body are associated with prestige and the declaration of certain acts, which are associated with stigma, and which are linked to situations of coercion. We emphasize how inmates themselves describe the legibility of another person's body and how quickly they are able to reconstruct someone else's social history based on their tattoos.

The third dimension is the process through which tattoos are actually created. We observe how tattooing is carried out inside prison under conditions in which the practice is formally prohibited and sanctioned, which tools are available, how techniques are improvised, what roles informal tattooists occupy in the prison micro-economy, and how their ability to tattoo is translated into their status within the inmate hierarchy.

The fourth dimension concerns subculturally specific systems. We pay particular attention to environments characterized by a high degree of internal organization and discipline, especially Russian-speaking criminal structures present within the Czech prison system. In these groups, the allocation of status, the authorization of symbols, and the control of their circulation operate far more strictly than in looser collectives. Here, tattooing does not function merely as individual self-marking but as a formal confirmation of an inmate's criminal trajectory; certain motifs cannot be worn without a recognized claim, and the unauthorized appropriation of a symbol is treated as a violation of hierarchy.

This contribution therefore does not simply offer a descriptive inventory of prison tattoo motifs. It treats tattooing as part of the internal organization of power, the symbolic economy of loyalty, and the social stratification of the carceral environment, and it situates this analysis in relation to the dynamics of status, loyalty, and stigmatization in both male and female prisons.

Results and Discussion

This section outlines the main analytical dimensions that emerge in the relationship between tattooing and the social dynamics of the prison environment. We focus on four areas: 1) tattooing as a means of stabilizing the identity of incarcerated persons within a regime of institutional control; 2) tattooing as an instrument of hierarchy, legitimation, and the maintenance of power; 3) the significance of tattoo placement on the body as a bearer of meaning that can function both as privilege and as stigmatization; and 4) the embodied nature of tattooing – specifically, the use of shared symbolic languages, pain, and control of the body as a performative confirmation of resilience and autonomy. These dimensions overlap and, taken together, show that tattooing in prison does not serve merely an aesthetic or individually expressive function, but it also operates as a mechanism of power, status, and behavioral regulation.

Tattooing as the Stabilization of Identity in Prison

The prison as an institution systematically disrupts and reshapes the incarcerated person's prior social identity, standardizes their appearance, and restricts their autonomy. The body is one of the few domains that remains, to some extent, under the person's own control. In this situation, tattooing becomes a means of actively reclaiming identity and inscribing it permanently into one's own body. The incarcerated person ceases to be only an object of institutional supervision and becomes an actor who, through tattooing, formulates a personal narrative about who they are, what they have lived through, whom they align with, which values they affirm, and what they reject.

This function of tattooing relates directly to what criminological literature describes as the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958). These pains include the loss of autonomy, the threat to physical safety, and, crucially, the loss of status. Tattooing helps symbolically compensate for that loss because it enables the incarcerated person to publicly demonstrate value within the prison's informal structure. Visible and mutually readable tattoos function as credentials of access to particular social spaces. They assert that the person in question is not “nobody” but someone with a history, connections, and belief.

In practice, this means that tattooing does not serve only an aesthetic role but may operate as a tool of practical orientation within the carceral environment. A person who bears certain markings may, in some situations, be perceived as more trustworthy, better networked, or less easily challenged within the prison's informal social order. In this sense, tattooing can be understood as carrying identificatory information through which other inmates infer status and anticipate how the person can be approached or addressed.

Hierarchy, Legitimacy, and the Control of Symbolism

In certain highly organized prison subcultures, tattooing is not understood primarily as an individual aesthetic choice but functions as a means of status marking. In these contexts, it serves to express affiliation, perceived trustworthiness, and position within the informal hierarchy of incarcerated persons. In selected collectives – in particular within highly disciplined Russian-speaking criminal structures present in the male prison environment in the Czech context (Lochmannová, 2020a) – the use of specific motifs is strictly controlled. In such cases, tattooing does not operate merely as a private adornment of the body but as a visual confirmation of the inmate's identity and as a sign of that person's acceptability to the group.

The legitimacy of a particular tattoo in these groups is conditional on whether it corresponds to the person's actual position. An incarcerated person who carries a motif that signals a higher status than that which others attribute to them is seen as violating the informal rules of the community. Tattooing is therefore understood not only as an assertion of identity but also as an assertion of rank. It is not assumed that anyone may wear any motif. Access to certain signs is socially regulated, and their display is regarded as legitimate only insofar as it aligns with the group's understanding of who the person is, which lineage they are associated with, and which role they actually hold.

In these cases, control applies not only to the motif itself but also to its placement on the body. Different areas of the body carry different symbolic weight depending on how they are read by others in the prison

environment. Highly visible areas such as the hands, neck, or face can function as a standing public declaration (Lochmannová, 2020b). A tattoo placed on such exposed parts of the body is effectively non-removable in everyday interaction and becomes part of the inmate's ongoing presentation to others. The physical pain associated with particular locations also contributes to their meaning. A tattoo placed in areas that are regarded within the community as especially painful may be interpreted as evidence of bodily resilience and the capacity to endure harm (Lochmannová, 2019). In the male prison environment, this resilience is often linked to notions of strength, endurance, and the ability to withstand physical confrontation. The body can thus become a readable medium in which the content of the motif, its visibility, and the willingness to undergo pain are brought together.

If a given symbol is perceived within such a group as illegitimately appropriated, a sanction imposed within the community may follow in some prison collectives. The purpose of such a sanction is to publicly challenge the person's status, undermine their claim to prestige, and mark them as subordinate or untrustworthy. This process effectively rewrites the body, and with it the social position of its bearer.

In these settings, tattooing can be understood as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). A tattoo represents a kind of value that is visible to others and that may shape perceived trustworthiness, the ability to speak on behalf of a group, or access to certain informal resources within the prison. This is not, however, a form of capital controlled solely by the individual. It is socially enforceable capital: the group can confirm it, contest it, or withdraw it. In this sense, tattooing functions not only as a retrospective record of the past but also as an ongoing claim to status.

Placement as Communication

Tattooing in the prison environment does not function only as an isolated image or text. It is part of a broader visual presentation of the body that is mobilized in everyday social contact among inmates. In mutual assessment, what is observed is not only the motif of the tattoo but also its position on the body, its extent, its technical execution, and its degree of visibility. The body thus operates as a medium that carries information about the bearer, and this information is actively observed and interpreted by others in the course of daily interaction.

The placement of a tattoo has its own level of meaning. A tattoo carried on a part of the body that is typically visible throughout the day is constantly present in the social space of the prison and becomes part of how the inmate is perceived. The relationship between visibility and meaning is not simple. It is not only a question of whether a tattoo can be covered; rather, a visibly worn motif enters into how the bearer is positioned among other inmates, which traits are ascribed to them, and what kind of interaction is anticipated with them. Placement therefore does not operate only as an outward declaration but also as an orienting point for others when forming relationships and boundaries within the prison setting.

The meaning of placement is also shaped by the bodily pain involved in obtaining the tattoo (Lochmannová, 2019). Certain parts of the body are regarded as physically more demanding to tattoo, and carrying a tattoo in such locations is described as evidence of resilience and the capacity to withstand pain. In the male prison environment, which is strongly oriented toward physical strength and the ability to endure confrontation, accepting a tattoo in such painful locations is often interpreted as a sign of endurance rather than merely an aesthetic decision.

Pain and placement operate together. When a tattoo is located on an area that is perceived as physically demanding to tattoo and is at the same time carried in a way that makes it difficult to overlook in routine interaction, that tattoo may be understood as confirming a particular mode of self-presentation. It is not only a declaration of affiliation or biography but also a presentation of bodily capacity to bear the consequences of that declaration. In this sense, tattooing becomes a means by which the body is used to assert and sustain a position within the prison environment.

Placement also has significance in situations where the tattoo did not arise voluntarily. In cases of punitive or stigmatizing tattooing – that is, tattooing applied against the will of the person – the location on the body is chosen so as to ensure sustained visibility in social contact (Lochmannová, 2015). The aim is for the mark to have a continuing effect and to remain present in how the person is seen by others. In such instances, the tattoo does not function as individual self-expression but as a tool of social categorization and disadvantage that persists after the moment of coercion.

For this reason, the inmate's body is readable not only as a personal autobiography but also as a bearer of relational information that matters for the everyday functioning of the group. Tattooing operates not only at the level of symbols but also at the level of their distribution on the body and the bodily cost of acquiring them. This underscores that, in the prison environment, identity is articulated not only through language but through skin.

Symbolic Languages, Pain, and the Control of the Body

Tattooing in the prison environment functions as a visual language that allows inmates to express and maintain relations of power, loyalty, and identity (Lochmannová, 2020b). Motifs that are outwardly presented as personal and individual can simultaneously operate as a code intelligible to other inmates. A tattoo may signal affiliation with a particular group (Lochmannová and Kolář, 2021), the role a person has assumed within that group, or participation in conduct considered significant within the informal hierarchy. It is therefore not only an aesthetic expression of the individual but also a form of communication that has value within the collective and is linked to expectations regarding the bearer's position.

The meaning of tattooing is multilayered. The same motif may be presented by its bearer as a personal narrative – for example, a reference to a life event, a loss, remorse, or an intention to change – while other inmates may read that same motif as a sign of loyalty, a claim to status, or confirmation of a particular role. These levels do not exclude one another; they coexist. It is precisely this simultaneity that enables tattooing to function within the prison subculture as a message directed at the initiated, while remaining outwardly defensible as individual self-expression.

The process through which a tattoo is created also carries meaning. In an environment where tattooing is formally prohibited and subject to disciplinary sanction (Lochmannová, 2020b), acquiring a tattoo typically entails accepting physical pain as well as a certain degree of institutional risk. This combination becomes part of the meaning of the tattoo. The willingness to endure pain is described in the male prison environment as confirmation of bodily toughness, persistence, and the ability to withstand demanding situations without displaying weakness (Lochmannová, 2019). In this sense, a tattoo is understood not only as an image but as a bodily performance that is observed and evaluated by others.

Pain also shapes the meaning of tattooing in situations where the tattoo is not the result of the bearer's free decision. Forced tattooing may function as a means of humiliation and of enforced demotion to a lower position (Lochmannová, 2015). In such cases, the body is modified so that it carries a mark that other inmates continue to read as confirmation of subordination or untrustworthiness. The physical pain of the procedure and the subsequent visibility of the result operate together. In this configuration, tattooing ceases to act as self-expression and becomes an instrument of social control through which power is exercised over the person.

This implies that, in prison, tattooing is a means through which the body becomes simultaneously the carrier and the object of power. Voluntarily acquired tattooing allows a person to affirm an accepted role and to maintain a particular form of self-image despite limited autonomy within a total institution. Forced tattooing, by contrast, functions as an enduring reminder of subordinated status. In both cases, tattooing links the symbolic content of the motif, the pain involved in producing it, and the social consequences of carrying that mark.

Conclusions

Tattooing in prison cannot be understood as merely an individual visual choice. Under the conditions of a total institution that restricts the autonomy of the incarcerated person and, to a large extent, standardizes their appearance, tattooing functions as a means of reclaiming and maintaining identity. It allows for the public declaration of a personal narrative, past experience, and relational ties that the institutional framework of imprisonment cannot fully control.

At the same time, tattooing is not purely an individual decision. In some groups within the prison, access to specific motifs is regulated, and their use is tied to the bearer's position as it is actually recognized by others. Such motifs function as visible markers of role, loyalty, and a claim to respect within the group. Tattooing is therefore not only a private aesthetic practice but also a form of symbolic capital that other inmates observe, acknowledge, or contest.

The meaning of tattooing is determined not only by the motif itself but also by its placement on the body and the conditions under which it was created. A tattoo that is prominently visible and was acquired at the cost of physical pain and institutional risk is understood as an embodied performance of resilience and the ability to withstand pressure. There is also an inverse position, in which tattooing is used as a means of humiliation and long-term disadvantage. In such cases, the body is rewritten so that it carries a lasting mark of subordinate status.

Taken together, tattooing simultaneously helps stabilize the self, maintains and confirms hierarchy among inmates, and operates as a medium through which power is exercised on the body.

These observations have direct implications for prison practice. Tattooing should not be treated only as a disciplinary infraction or as a simple indicator of “criminal identity.” It carries information about informal ties, loyalties, lines of conflict, and vulnerabilities within the inmate population, which may not appear in official documentation. Reading tattooing in its context – that is, as a combination of the motif, its placement, and the circumstances of its creation – can help clarify who holds influence in a given environment, who relies on the protection of a particular group, and who is instead exposed to pressure or long-term disadvantage.

It is also important to distinguish between tattooing that serves to preserve psychological cohesion and a sense of continuity of identity during imprisonment, and tattooing that functions as a visible carrier of stigmatization. This distinction has direct relevance both for security work with the inmate group and for working with the individual in the process of resocialization.

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