Perception of Tattoos at Parkland College

When conducting our group project we wanted to find out student’s perceptions of tattoos at Parkland College. We randomly selected students in the hallways to interview and we selected a wide array of students from many different ethnicities, as well as students with and without tattoos. We asked the interviewees questions about the presence of tattoos in the workforce, and the influence of tattoos on education, socioeconomic status, and gender. I was part of the interview process and when asking questions I targeted my questions more toward gender inequality and racial inequality because I am a female and I am in an interracial relationship. I also do not have tattoos myself so when asking questions I asked them from the point of view of someone that does not have any tattoos. This could have limited our results from the people that do have tattoos, although one of my group members who does have a tattoo asked questions with me so we balanced each other out.

From the data we collected we found that the students we interviewed thought that employers should require employees to cover up tattoos. This is important because we thought that with the way the United States has been evolving toward greater diversity and tolerance in many categories, for instance there is a greater acceptance of new norms such as gay marriage, tattoos would be more accepted. It seems that our society hasn’t changed as much as it is perceived to be. According to Carrie M. Lane, a “social contract of employment in which corporate employers reward loyalty and hard work with job security, steady pay, and a shot at upward mobility was never a reality for the majority of U.S. workers” (2009: 682). Requiring
employees to cover up their tattoos is another way in which corporate America controls its workers. We heard stories that employees are forced to take measures such as laser removal or buying expensive make up in order to try and get a job or move up in the job market. This is significant because if the popular idea of college students at Parkland is that people should be required to cover up their tattoos then it doesn’t look like there will be much change in tolerance in the workplace in future for the next generation. That is, the workplace will still require measures to be taken in order to cover up body art and suppress artistic expression.

Another significant finding from our group project interviews and participant observations is that tattoos are considered to be more inferior if they are sported by an African American than by a White American. According to Jane H. Hill, in her article “Language, Race, and White Public Space” whites in our society are considered to be the standard that all people should live up to and whenever other types of people do something it is considered to be done in white space (1998: 686). This supports the answers we received that it is more acceptable for whites to have tattoos because they have a more positive connotation than tattoos on people of darker complexions. From one interview that we conducted an interviewee said that a cashier who has a tattoo and is African American is looked at as someone who could not get a better job and is someone that is not looked at as successful or as someone who is doing something positive with their life, whereas when a white person has a tattoo it is looked at as art and not as a “tacky thing put on their body”. This shows how our society has made some progress but biased beliefs still exist to this day and will be hard to overcome.

Gender and the view of women and men in our society emerged when our interviewees talked of placement of tattoos on men and women’s bodies. We found that it was more acceptable for men to have tattoos as long as they were placed in masculine parts of the body
such as the bicep, back, or chest. The view of women was more complicated but we found that it was acceptable for women to have tattoos as long as they were placed in feminine parts of the body such as on the foot, behind the ear, or on the shoulder blade. One interesting perspective that an interviewee shared was that women with tattoos are not viewed as highly as a woman without tattoos. She stated that the widely accepted belief that women should be untouched or a virgin is applied to this because getting a tattoo takes away from “virgin skin”. I thought that this was an interesting point because I have never seen tattoos as taking away virginity. This also ties to many discussions that we had in class about how masculinity is viewed more highly than femininity in our society.

In conclusion, the group project found many different perceptions of students about tattoos at Parkland College. The topic touched on the issues of workplace protocol, gender and racial inequality. We explored the topics of white privilege, masculinity, femininity, racism, and socioeconomic status. We discovered that tattoos are more accepted now but that as a society we have a long way to go before tattoos will be viewed in a more positive light such as being considered body art and a way for people to express themselves. In order to continue with this research project more questions could be asked about socioeconomic status, beliefs about tattoos in other cultures compared to the United States, and views about generational change by interviewing an older and younger audience and comparing their results. One question that I would have loved to ask the interviewees would have been “Why do you feel this way about tattoos?” after we asked them how they felt because I think that it is important to understand why people have the beliefs they do. This topic is very applicable to anthropology and is very relevant to our student community.
WORKS CITED

Lane, Carrie M. “Man enough to let my wife support me: how changing models of career and gender are reshaping the experience of employment”. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 36, No. 4, (November 2009), pp. 681–692.